

# The high cost of darkness

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Late last week, I placed a telephone call to a close friend of mine, a highly successful businessman who lives in Ikoyi, an address that is home to many of Nigeria's rich, famous and connected—as well as expatriates who work in the diplomatic service or oil sector. This friend has a booming, exuberant voice and usually speaks energetically. In short, his verbal manner over the phone leaves you in no doubt about his cheerful spirit. On this occasion, however, I detected an unaccustomed weariness in his voice. He sounded like a man beset by a crisis he was unable to see his way out of.

“Are things well with you?” I asked, perturbed by his tired tone.

He went straight to the heart of the matter. “For three days,” he told me, “I've not had any electric supply in my home or at the office. I've been running the power generator nonstop for three days.” This man is an employer of labor. If the power crisis continues to eat up his business capital, he will be forced to fire some of his workers to cut costs. Unemployment, which is intolerably bad, will worsen.

One of my first thoughts was: This is a portrait of life in Olusegun Obasanjo's “modern Nigeria.” My friend's complaint echoed what I've heard over the last few weeks from many other friends, relatives and acquaintances. Power supply is at desperate levels of crisis. In fact, Nigeria

is advancing fast backwards to the Dark Ages. Meanwhile Umar Yar'Adua, the man Obasanjo unilaterally gave the gift of “president,” appears too bewildered to do anything about the deteriorating situation.

It was not supposed to be this way. In 2001, I was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Lagos when many Nigerians exuded optimism about the imminent end to their power woes. The optimism was rooted in a pledge by then President Obasanjo that, come December 31, 2001, the nation's perennial experience of power outages would be a thing of the past. Obasanjo had actually punctuated the pledge by stating “on my honor.”

I wasn't one of those who put much faith in Obasanjo's promise. Two years of observing his presidency had taught me that here was a man who has discounted honor from his public—and likely private—conduct. Had anybody asked me to wager a bet on Obasanjo's honor, I would have responded that the man's sense of honor is, by definition, dishonorable and dishonest. This was the president who pledged to alleviate poverty, and then voted billions of naira to carry out his promise. Yet, as months passed, many poor Nigerians complained that their poverty, far from alleviating, was deepening.

Did Obasanjo apologize for a failed policy? Not in the least. He haughtily proclaimed that his policy had met with roaring success. So impressive was his poverty alleviation scheme, he said, that he felt it was time to erase poverty altogether from the Nigerian space. Hence was born Obasanjo's poverty eradication program. Many more billions of naira got funneled into this old scam dressed up with a new name.

Despite the larger budget, the scourge of poverty festered. If any poor person's condition was bettered, Obasanjo in his strange wisdom chose not to provide proof of it. But a few of Obasanjo's associates must have smiled all the way to another pricey car or two. Perhaps an anointed few were empowered with enough poverty eradication cash to buy yet another high-priced home in Europe, North America or South Africa.

As I explained then to an older relative of mine who put a lot of trust in the former president's promise to solve the nation's power plagues, Obasanjo's antecedents simply did not inspire confidence. Obasanjo struck me as a man with no sense of shame, no sense of irony, and plain disdain for his fellows. Obasanjo could read long and fervent speeches that struck all the right notes, and he could look people straight in the face and voice seemingly solemn pledges, but he lacks the ethical funds to match his deeds to his words. After I had framed my doubts, my relative tried to convince me that Obasanjo was a man with a sense of history. He reminded me that Obasanjo had set up a technical committee headed by Liyel Imoke to translate the power promise into reality.

Though confident in the correctness of my reading of Obasanjo, I deeply wished that I would be proved wrong. I hoped that, at the end of 2001, the Imoke committee would usher in a new dawn in Nigeria—a new era of “regular, uninterrupted power supply,” to quote Obasanjo's exact phrase. One wished that, as 2001 drew to a close, the country's electric power corporation would draw a curtain over its decades-long history of incompetence and ineptitude. My whole being fantasized about a born-again NEPA that would shake off its reputation as a dependable supplier of darkness and become versed in “light” matters.

Alas, one hoped and wished and prayed in vain. Obasanjo and Imoke's minds were not in the business of changing the shameful state of power supply. Their apparent mission was to squander the nation's resources in a sleazy game to enrich a few of the former president's men. How much exactly did they waste? Sixteen billion dollars, by the going account. At the very least, going by the testimony of current Aso Rock occupant, Umar Yar'Adua, Obasanjo spent \$10 billion of the nation's cash on the power sector—and has nothing to show for it. Imoke and Obasanjo spent billions of dollars to give us guaranteed darkness!

Imoke's so-called technical committee offered the first sign that Obasanjo's pledge was a ruse. Just weeks before the committee was supposed to conclude its task—and after billions of dollars had been spent—the committee stunned Nigerians with a blatant lie. They said their mandate was not to ensure regular power but to generate 4000 megawatts of power. And in a clear insult to the intelligence of Nigerians, Imoke declared that his panel had broken some world

record in the generation of the required megawatts!

Make no mistake: it was first class fraud. Nigerians would know if there was a marked improvement in their power supply. How many people independently verified that Imoke and co. had generated 4000 megawatts? Not one person, as far as I know. Imoke and his panel had failed disastrously, and they had failed in a public, undeniable way.

Imoke had the perverse luck of failing in a dispensation that trumpeted and rewarded failures. In Imoke's case, he was immediately regaled with a national honor. Then he was offered a cabinet position—to (predictably) oversee the power industry. And because he maintained his streak of failure during his ministerial run, he was anointed to take over the gubernatorial mantle in Cross River State. To borrow the title of a forthcoming book by Kunle Ajibade, one of Nigeria's finest journalists: What a country!

Just how terribly Obasanjo and Imoke betrayed Nigeria came to light in a series of public hearings by a House of Representatives panel probing the former president's investment of billions of dollars in wasteful power projects. Last week, the legislative committee heard from Mr. James Olotu, the Managing Director of the National Integrated Power Project (NIPP). He testified that Obasanjo and Imoke awarded billions of naira worth of no-bid contracts to contractors with little or no experience in the power sector. Olotu knew what he was talking about: his job was to anchor the numerous power plant projects.

Olotu revealed that, in one instance, Obasanjo gave a huge contract to a company with less than \$200 of base capital to its name! Obasanjo and Imoke reportedly approved high percentages of payment for low percentages of contract execution. Two Chinese firms allegedly pocketed N116 billion for doing next to nothing. One of the Chinese companies was "overpaid to the tune of N437 million" even though NIPP evaluated the two contracts "at almost zero level execution." Among those reported to have reaped a stupendous windfall is General Abdulsalami Abubakar (retired), the man who handed power to Obasanjo in 1999. His firm, Enego, reportedly collected N13.2 billion after executing less than 20 percent of its contract.

In plain language, Olotu and other witnesses were stating that our former president and Imoke put large amounts of Nigeria's cash in companies' pockets and said, "Go get yourselves some nice treats!"

Nigerians ought to be outraged, and to insist on a full accounting. Obasanjo must be brought before the legislature to reconcile the gap between his dizzying expenditure on power projects and the desultory state of power supply. If it is determined that he enriched himself, directly or indirectly, or set out to enrich others at the expense of the nation's interests, then he deserves to be tried. And he and the beneficiaries of his illicit largesse ought to be compelled to pay back every single kobo.

Obasanjo likes to style himself "the father of modern Nigeria." If Nigerians had let him, he would have changed the constitution in order to give us many more years of billions wasted without

discernible positive results. Shame to the man's shams! Even those Nigerians who once touted Obasanjo as a reformer must now be appalled by the true face of the man's extensive, unpatriotic scheme to burden his country with the most expensive darkness in the history of mankind.

### New elections and the Iwu problem

Nigerians are about to witness the first of new elections that became necessary after court-ordered invalidations of the electoral sham of April 2007. One unresolved question remains what to do about Maurice Iwu, the chairman of the electoral commission who is widely perceived as the unacceptable face of last year's botched elections. Last week, Iwu sent one of his lieutenants, Dr. Muhammed Jumare, to confer with politicians in Kogi where a new governorship election is in the offing. Iwu's message, as read by Jumare, was to gripe that the electoral commission had been unfairly "called names." He then said: "This time around, we have no anointed candidate at all and nobody is going to ask us to do that...the winner will really emerge as the winner, this time around, we are really going to make sure that only the winner that is declared, not anybody else."

Iwu's words are about as good as Obasanjo's. His weird statement would reward close dissection. But the long and short of it is this: If INEC is to regain a modicum of credibility as an impartial umpire, then Iwu must leave (or be shown the door). It's a minimum expectation. Nigerians deserve an INEC leader whose integrity is proven and

unquestionable. Iwu can't claim to be that man.

## 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
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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

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