

What a country!

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By Okey Ndibe

I thought hard and long about a title for today's column. In the end, I decided to borrow the title of a forthcoming book by Kunle Ajibade, one of the intrepid editors at *TheNews* magazine and a treasured colleague and friend of mine.

What a country indeed!

Some may not realize it, but a battle is raging for the soul of Nigeria. The venerable Chinua Achebe has written that Nigeria is a country that manages to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. To read Achebe's statements on Nigeria is to become aware of the depths of a true patriot's great expectations—and great disappointment. The novelist, whose classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is being feted globally on its fiftieth anniversary, loves his country so deeply he speaks about its travails with a pained voice.

Nigeria is a country that breaks the heart of many citizens. More than two decades ago, Wole Soyinka, another writer who has put Nigeria on the global cultural map, lamented that his generation was wasted. That assessment has been so oft quoted it has become part of Soyinka lore. What's not remembered is that, since Soyinka spoke, another generation or two has followed into the wasted bracket. Worse, our youth, who deserve to radiate confidence and vibrancy, are consigned to watching helplessly as their fortunes are turned into misfortune. Our youth

may not quite be wasted, but they are wasting away.

One has said it again, but it bears repeating: Nigeria is a country conceived in hope but nurtured into hopelessness. It is a country that boasts some of the most educated and enlightened people in the world, but a perennial member of the world's least desirable indices. Nigeria's shame is that, on most social misery lists, it is grouped with—and often below—such countries as the two Congos, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, and Mali. Ghana, Uganda, Cote D'Ivoire, Libya, and Botswana now significantly dwarf Nigeria, which once parroted itself as the giant of Africa.

Nigeria is the portrait of an inexcusable laggard. It has an array and abundance of natural resources—in fact, on such prodigious scale as to make it the envy of other less endowed nations. It also has a complement of energetic, bright men and women who can hold their own anywhere in the world. Why then is Nigeria mired in this dispiriting state? What explains the gap between a nation's great promise and its paltry achievement?

One major answer lies in the quality of leadership that has run—ruined is the word—the country. Too many of us went to sleep and left the field of public office to a confederacy of dunces, to invoke the title of John Kennedy Toole's novel. Look at any list of Nigerians who have held

exalted political office, and you'll notice a predominance of men and women of little or no moral mettle, little or no vision, and little or no idea of what it takes to transform a polity. Part of the tragedy is that, even when some of these elements boast degrees, they have lacked the moral insight that makes the critical difference between possessing certificates and being enlightened.

Nigeria has been, and remains, ensnared in a cult of mediocrity. It is a country burdened with rascals masquerading as leaders. These so-called leaders take pride, not in acting as agents of positive change, but in the size of their loot. Their primary organ is not the brain but the gut. Gorging on gruel, instead of mulling social policy, is their favorite preoccupation if not sole pastime. They delight in reigning over, and ruining, the affairs of the collectivity.

And so we have quite a country! And we have a battle taking shape, a veritable contest between those who profit from Nigeria's tragic state and those who insist that it is time a much-abused people shook off their yoke and realized their potential. It is a fierce battle, even if the signs are not writ large enough for all to see.

Depraved as it sounds, there are many who are invested in perpetuating the country's doldrums. As we have seen or read recently, there are Nigerians who don't mind at all that the country's power supply deteriorates. The more erratic the power supply, the more their private pockets bulge. But there are citizens who are sick and tired of being played for fools, and who won't stand anymore for the greed of the mindless profiteers from misery.

What a country! Last week, Governors Liyel Imoke and Olusegun Agagu appeared before the House of Representatives panel probing the \$3.8 billion (or \$10 billion or \$16 billion) scandal in the power sector. Before being shepherded into gubernatorial seats, the two men had "served" in former President Olusegun Obasanjo's cabinet, specifically overseeing the power sector. In fact, part of the curriculum vitae they took to their governorship posts was their vaunted achievements in transforming the nation's power industry.

Yet, here were the men before the legislative panel putting on a shameful puppet show. Suddenly, Agagu did not know a thing about what transpired in his ministry under his watch. Questioned about contracts that were awarded to unregistered, even ghost, companies, he told the law makers that only the bureaucrats could answer to that. He sought to leave the image of a totally disconnected, absentminded boss who regarded the matter of contractors' legal status as beneath his ministerial attention.

Imoke was even more pathetic. Nigerians regard him, understandably, the central figure in the scandal. He was both the chairman of a so-called technical team that was supposed to usher Nigeria into a season of regular, uninterrupted power supply and later a minister of power. Far from witnessing any improvement, power supply dipped during his ministerial run.

You'd expect that a man with such an unimpressive profile would show up in a somber fashion. Not Imoke. Affecting the swagger of a well-to-do man, he strutted into the parliamentary session with a

retinue of cheerleaders in tow. The legislators and Nigerians no doubt looked to Imoke to provide illuminating answers about contractors who were almost wholly paid for work that was at rudimentary levels of executions. Imoke had other plans. He played to the gallery. His manner suggested a man chagrined about the hullabaloo over the (possibly) \$16 billion Obasanjo frittered away in power contracts. Imoke pointed the legislators to South Africa's expenditure of \$41 billion on energy needs. The point was that he and Obasanjo did not squander as much as they might have. To complete the farce, his presentation was punctuated by intermittent applause by his cheerleaders!

What a country! Nigerians heard testimony about the power scandal that only a novelist with an extravagant imagination could have conjured up. It was said that the former president commissioned power projects that did not exist anywhere in Nigeria! We heard about presidential orders that circumvented due process to withdraw huge caches of cash. There were accounts of a president who seemed set on awarding contracts to companies that seemed least likely to do the job at all—and then hastening the payment process.

What a country! In the last week, Nigerians were treated to a tale of two electoral tribunal verdicts. In Oyo, the tribunal split four to one in favor of upholding the "election" of Governor Adebayo Alao-Akala. In Edo, Justice Peter Umeadi led a panel that unanimously declared Dr. Oserheimen Osunbor a gubernatorial impostor. In a six-hour judgment that many lawyers have lauded as a model of judicial thoroughness, the tribunal declared

Adams Oshiomhole, a former labor leader, as the winner of last April's governorship election. The verdict in Oyo elicited a mournful public reaction. In Edo, the verdict aroused widespread celebration.

In Oyo, the public's funereal mood told an eloquent story. In its quietly powerful way, the people of Oyo scolded the four judges who opted to go the Ogebe way, even though the truth—as the author of the impressive minority report demonstrated—was clear. In Edo, the mass of dancers indicated their admiration for a tribunal that refused to be blinded to the truth. Oyo and Edo: battlegrounds in the contest between judicial cowardice and judicial courage. One verdict showcased judicial blight; the other was a bright, proud moment that has done credit to the judiciary, buoyed the nation and boosted democracy.

What a country! Umar Yar'Adua, whose "election" owed to Obasanjo's do-or-die mindset, has taken to mimicking his despised predecessor's rhetoric. Last week, Yar'Adua visited Adamawa, a state already tense from the build-up to a judicially mandated new election. Speaking in a tone that revealed his despotic impulse, Yar'Adua served notice that he regarded the coming election as "war."

Like Obasanjo before him, Yar'Adua is quick to turn every election into a war. It is as if the object is the acquisition of power. Like his predecessor, Yar'Adua does not seem to have figured out how to use his power to lift his nation up. Last week, in his Easter and Eid-el-Maulud message, he implored Nigerians to maintain patience with his slow style, as if slowness were a prized statecraft.

Through forty-eight years of national life, Nigerians have done nothing but wait in patience. They have waited patiently for dependable electricity, good roads, jobs upon graduation, security, credible elections, water, streets that are not clogged up with dirt, even for hope. A people who have waited so long, and whose waiting has been rewarded only with disappointment and entreaties to wait some more, have every right to demand that their leaders take a turn waiting.

Why can't Yar'Adua and other Nigerian leaders be less hasty in voting themselves scandalous perks and privileges? Why can't the political leadership patiently refrain from looting the nation's treasury and aborting its dreams? Why not retreat from a policy of shielding Obasanjo and other serving and past government functionaries who committed manifold economic crimes against their nation? Why not abandon the policy of narcotizing the citizenry with false hope whenever they voice demands for policies that would make their nation fit for human habitation? Why not disavow the temptation to rig elections and usurp power not freely given by Nigerians? Why not stop the habit of approaching each election as a war? Yes, why not?

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?

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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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