

A new free sleeping pill for Nigerians - it's called patience

Monday, 31 March 2008

By Okey Ndibe

Nigerians are already wondering how Umar Yar'Adua's stewardship will turn out. Attentive observers can foretell: In a huge disappointment.

Two weeks ago, Yar'Adua handed Nigerians his version of a pill that every past Nigerian "leader," whether usurper or elected, has prescribed. He asked us to be patient. With patience, he pledged, we will eventually enjoy the fruits of development. That is nothing more, or less, than asking Nigerians to take a sleeping pill.

Like others before him, Mr. Yar'Adua wants Nigerians to doze off. A people lost in deep slumber are the dream of Nigerian public officials. If citizens sleep, then they won't stand in the way of "leaders" whose one dependable expertise is self-service at the expense of the people.

The first six months of a leader's term are often the most dynamic. It's a period when an adept leader sets the tone of his administration. It is a time when a committed and visionary leader exhibits his energy and mettle. A serious-minded leader seizes his first six months to lay the foundation for his administration's policy and programmatic keynotes.

By that measure, one can surmise that Yar'Adua's priority is to get himself and

us as much sleep as possible over the next four years. If the man realizes that Nigeria is steeped in deep social and political crises, he is doing an excellent job of hiding it from the rest of us. He read a good speech at his "inauguration," a speech filled with feel-good phrases and punctuated by lavish promises. He was going to declare an emergency in the power sector.

Ten months later, there's no practical sign that Yar'Adua still recollects the speech he read. Or that he has kept the speechwriter around him to remind him of the promises to which he committed himself. In the absence of this self-awareness, it is no surprise that Yar'Adua wants us to swallow his sleeping pill called patience—and to wake up only four years later, or even beyond.

Yar'Adua's problem arises, one suspects, from two sources. One is that the man did not set out to be anybody's president. He was dragged into the role by a former president who considered him a manipulable Man Friday. True, he has not altogether rewarded Obasanjo's investment in that regard, but he has not risen, either, to the challenge of governing a nation plagued by myriads of socio-economic problems. The other source is Yar'Adua's burden of illegitimacy. The Justice James Ogebe verdict that unanimously upheld his

“election” was so craven that it ended up deepening, rather than dispelling, doubts about the current resident of Aso Rock.

Hampered by ill-preparation and the hanky panky that enthroned him, Yar’Adua is likely to be stuck, for the next four years, offering us little more than the fiction of good times in the future. If, and only if, we remain good boys and girls and lull ourselves to sleep. After all, when you sleep, you improve your odds of having fantastic dreams. Trouble is, that when we sleep, we also fall prey to nightmares.

It is a perilous deal. Is there any mature Nigerian who is still fooled by such distracting appeal to be patient? Patience was also the watchword of the Shehu Shagari administration. While the majordomos of that dispensation basked in splendor and wealth, they lectured Nigerians to remember that Rome was not built in a day. Meanwhile, the big names in that government inflicted on their nation the kind of damage that could easily have destroyed Rome in half a day.

In the mid-1980s, in the wake of the profound social misery unleashed on us following Ibrahim Babangida’s adoption of the structural adjustment program, Nigerians received the same entreaty. Be patient, we were told, and things will be fine. Well, things were fine for Babangida and for a small circle of his friends and associates. The vast majority of Nigerians were sapped into destitution. They soon abandoned hope of receiving their own windfall, or had to cast their lot with prosperity-vending pastors and prophets.

A few days ago, I was in a telephone conversation with a New York-based

Nigerian friend when he said, “Based on everything that’s coming out about [former President Olusegun] Obasanjo, it’s clear that Yar’Adua is much better.”

It’s an exasperating proposition. On the one hand, given the hell that Nigeria went through during Obasanjo’s eight years in office, it is difficult to imagine anything or anybody worse. Nigeria earned an unprecedented amount of cash during the Obasanjo years, and the man dutifully frittered it away in building “419” roads, commissioning phoney power projects, and mythically eliminating poverty from the Nigerian space.

On the other hand, one must be realistic enough to say: one can’t say yet. It is morning yet on Yar’Adua’s watch, but the shape of things isn’t inspiring. To be sure, a determined Yar’Adua could easily do worse than Obasanjo.

At any rate, I told my friend that, after nearly fifty years of flag independence, Nigerians should not be stuck in the language of “this one is better than Obasanjo.” Back in 1966, when the military first intervened in the political life of the nation, many Nigerians were ecstatic. Even those who were wary about the military in governance comforted themselves with the argument that the khaki rulers were bound to be better than the politicians they sacked.

When Yakubu Gowon was deposed, and Murtala Muhammed and later Obasanjo succeeded him, the refrain was the same: They’re better than Gowon. When former President Shehu Shagari was toppled, there was the usual expectation that the new military henchmen could never sin as much as the NPN honchos. Yet, when

the duo of Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon cracked their whips on our collective backs, we groaned and prayed for deliverance from their yoke. After Ibrahim Babangida elbowed Buhari and co. out of the way, many of us exulted, certain that our prayers had been answered.

Eight years later, with the albatross of June 12 to compound other political, social and economic woes, Nigerians took to the streets to force Babangida's exit from power. In his place came the forgettable—and indeed largely forgotten—interim aberration of Mr. Ernest Shonekan. Then followed Sani Abacha, a man who for a moment won over some fans by going after profiteers from failed banks and abandoned contracts. In the end, Abacha was so artless as a thief that he simply sent vans to the Central Bank to haul away hard currency to his official residence. He lived by the dictum that a nation's wealth was a military ruler's private treasury. His political ambitions evolved as well. Once acclimated to the grandeur of office, Abacha was in no mood to leave. Instead, he began to design a plan to perpetuate himself. As that plan unfurled, Nigerians' romance with him soured.

Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief and serenaded God with gratitude after "a coup from heaven" took Abacha down from his perch and straight to the grave. After a brief transition overseen by Abdulsalam Abubakar, Nigerians saw Obasanjo's second appearance. Recruited for the top job straight out of prison, he was sponsored by a coalition of retired and serving military officers. The rest is (still unfolding) history.

The point isn't that Nigerian politicians are corrupt. There are corrupt politicians everywhere, including in the nations that are held up as exemplars of social development. The tragedy, instead, is that Nigerian politicians practice a brand of corruption that goes beyond the greed for lucre and enters the realm of evil.

Let me illustrate. My family and I have spent several Christmas vacations in the Philippines. Anybody who reads Transparency International's annual corruption index would know that the Philippines does "well" in that regard; it's regularly cited as one of the world's most corrupt nations. When a big contract is awarded there, Filipino columnists and citizens assume that public officials' palms were greased. The public has also come to suspect that every public contract is, in all likelihood, inflated. Still, at the end of the day, the contract is executed.

By contrast, Nigerian politicians not only inflate the cost of contracts, they also arrange to share the monies with contractors with the understanding that no job (or very little) is to be done. That's the most unforgivable aspect of the scandal of power projects initiated by Obasanjo. Official after official of government agencies told the House of Representatives, on oath, that the former president approved payments for contracts that were often at zero level of execution. How come not a single one of those officials had enough patriotic fund to resign in protest while that scam was in progress? Why did not one of them break his or her silence while Obasanjo lied to the world about his government's faithfulness to due process?

If the billions of dollars wasted in that scandal had led to a noticeable

improvement in the nation's power supply, many Nigerians would today be willing to forgive Obasanjo. Some would even have declared him a hero. But what he did was to transfer public funds into private pockets for the sheer gluttony of it. It's evil.

Worse, Obasanjo played Father Christmas with his nation's resources at a time he continually hiked the price of fuel, ostensibly on the ground that the country was too poor to maintain fuel subsidies. For Obasanjo, it was okay for everyday Nigerians to bear the brunt of harsh economic policies while a few friends of the former president, foreign as well as domestic, received billion naira pay-offs.

All told, one's hunch is that, unless Yar'Adua receives a legitimate mandate in a credible election, he is on track to join a parade of mediocre rulers who squandered the promise of a nation that ought to be a splendid success story.

Why was Alexander Gaadi arrested?

Nigerians should be disturbed by the arrest of Dr. Alexander Gaadi, a major civic leader in Benue State who successfully sued the Federal Government for the 2001 genocidal attack on Zaki-Biam carried out by the Nigerian Army. Gaadi, whose suit resulted in a whopping N41.8b judgment, was reportedly abducted from his home by eighty armed operatives of the State Security Service (SSS).

In a chilling account of the event, The Guardian of March 29, 2008 reported that Gaadi was picked up from his Makurdi residence in "a commando-like

operation." That any citizen could be abducted in such a vulgar display of force is an outrage. That it should happen to Gaadi, a stroke patient who recently criticized Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa, must alert us to the current regime's potential for slipping into despotism. Nigerians should rise and demand an explanation for this impunity.

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.