

Why he needed a third term

Monday, 07 April 2008

By Okey Ndibe

Slightly more than two years ago, I wrote a column titled "Why Obasanjo needs a third term." Two days ago, a friend who had just reread categorized it prophetic. He told me he had looked again at the column in light of former President Olusegun Obasanjo's evolution into Nigeria's villain-in-chief.

Prodded by my friend, I too stole a peek at the said column, which was originally published in the Guardian of Thursday, March 2, 2006 and here on NVS. Given that ours is a country in which memory is often weak and fleeting, it seemed to me apt to begin today's reflections by sharing some of the insights from two years ago.

In the essay's opening paragraph, I submitted: "It is now no longer a secret that President Olusegun Obasanjo needs a third term, indeed a life term, in office. Despite the disingenuous attempts at obfuscation by aides like Onyema Ugochukwu and Femi Fani-Kayode, the truth is out, and it is rather bald. Obasanjo needs a third term, and he needs it desperately. No sophist, however gifted, can mask the fact that what is now termed third term agenda is real. So the question: Why does the president need to prolong his stay in office?"

Here's how I began to answer the question I posed: "You could say that Obasanjo's personal fortunes depend on his securing a new lease on Aso Rock. Anybody with the president's recent

history won't commit the incaution of loosening his grasp on power. Not if he can help it. Obasanjo can tell, I am sure, that his post-power days will prove tumultuous. Too much is personally at stake for the man. And I stress, personally."

Once out of office, the former president would "enter and operate in the Nigerian society as Citizen Obasanjo." He would be "divested of much of the trappings and accoutrements of office, including his awesome army guards. In a word, he'd come down from the Olympian heights of gods inhabited by Nigerian presidents and governors and be compelled, literally, to rub shoulders with mere mortals. That's a forbidding prospect for a former deity (sorry, president)."

Truth is, most psychologically well-adjusted men and women are able to manage the transition from the zenith of power to the awesome ordinariness of citizenship. But Obasanjo struck me then as a man fitted out with an inflated ego, a sort of megalomaniacal freak. He behaved as if he were a god, nothing less. He came across as that strange being that one of my professors had described as "a self-created man in love with his creator." Obasanjo mistook his vulgar passions for the public good. It was no puzzle that such a man dreaded the prospect of exiting from power. What's worse, he had compounded his oversized ego with

grave illicit acts during his two-term tenure that was a reign of criminality.

Given his self-created predicament, Obasanjo's pursuit of a third term agenda made (perverse) sense. As I wrote two years ago, "As soon as Nigerians discover that a god had toppled from the spheres and landed in the dust, trust them to begin to ask questions. And I mean hard, rude, searing questions. Some would demand that the ex-president give full accounting of his stewardship of Nigeria's oil sector. They'd want to know how much of the revenue earned by their nation in a season of skyrocketing oil prices was duly entered in the books. They'd sniff and snoop, asking if any chunk of their oil wealth had taken on wings and flown away. If anything suspicious were found, they'd demand answers. They'd ask the new god to empanel a commission to investigate where their money went. A man like Obasanjo won't like to stomach this manner of insolence. If his advisors and he can pull off a rape on the constitution, then he won't ever have to worry. He will retain his address at Aso Rock until death do them part, retaining his seat in the pantheon of gods."

In pondering our emperor's claim to indispensability, I stated that "Men possessed of commonsense have the prudence not to question gods. And if godless men like Wole Soyinka breach protocol and dare to ask questions of deities, well, there is already an effective solution, thanks to the sheer sagacity of the president's ever-faithful amanuensis, Femi Fani-Kayode. A few weeks ago, Mr. Fani-Kayode enunciated the government's sound policy of not speaking to Soyinka and other atheists. Firmly entrenched as godhead, Obasanjo

would be guaranteed at least a four-year deferral on rude questions. Rather than suffer uncouth critics pointing fingers at him or putting his name and corruption in the same sentence, he'd continue to enjoy his monopoly as the one who issues certificates of damnation and wholesomeness."

Obasanjo, I argued two years ago, "has no wish to be hounded with...irreverent questions. A third term, or more, is the surest way of keeping himself inoculated from such rudeness. Who in his right mind would willfully subject himself to the vulgar questions of an ignorant mob?" As one foresaw it, the questions would cover quite wide ground. "Why, Sir, many Nigerians would ask, were several corrupt governors close to you shielded from exposure and embarrassment? Where, Sir, did all the billions voted to "eradicate" poverty go? After squandering billions of naira on your technical board, tell us what became of that presidential promise of 'regular, uninterrupted power supply.' How did your championing of Lamidi Adedibu's rapacious designs in Oyo advance your vaunted program of social, political and economic reforms?" I predicted that "the questions will come fast and furious."

Lest anybody accuse me of gloating about possession of prophetic insight, let me quickly confess that I predicted several scenarios that have not come to pass. My column was a mixed bag of good, bad and indifferent "predictions." I wrote: "The day Obasanjo leaves office, count on some troublesome 'stake holders' from Anambra state dragging him to court. They may petition the courts to compel the ex-president to tell all he knows about the hired hoodlums who in late 2004 rampaged through their state,

accompanied by hailing police officers, to burn public buildings and cars. Trust many Nigerians to re-open the issue of why a governor's abductor was not tried for treason, but was instead rewarded with an oil block and elevated to the highest chambers of the president's party. Trust the few survivors of the Odi massacres to ask their own questions. They may want to know whether it was the ghosts of their slain brethren that had arisen to give the president ninety-six percent of votes cast in Bayelsa state in 2003. I'd be surprised if somebody didn't dust up the genocide that occurred in Zaki-Biam under the president's watch. The people of Oyo state may be emboldened to question how police under Obasanjo's control were used to ransack Agodi and to throw out the duly elected governor. The president's kinsmen, especially Owu kingmakers, may have a thing or two to say about their humiliation at the hands of a fallen god."

One thing was clear to me two years ago: the third term agenda was driven by a criminal impulse, a desperation on the part of Obasanjo and his closest associates to put a curious, confounded citizenry with lots of questions on mute control. The third term gambit had nothing whatsoever to do with sustaining Obasanjo's ostensible reforms. My concluding paragraph of that 2006 column bears reproduction here. I wrote: "The president's handlers appear determined to stake everything on an odious quest for a third term (which, if wangled, will be quickly turned into an indefinite term). Why? The president, I suggest, is in no hurry to answer the questions many Nigerians will ask, in parliament as well as in and out of court. He desperately needs an indefinite

postponement of reckoning, but Nigerians strike me as equally determined in their pursuit of reckoning. Obasanjo may angle all he wants for a life presidency, but his needs in this regard are at odds with the nation's larger interests."

Nigerians won the day the National Assembly sentenced the scam of third term to the trashcan where it belonged. Since then, we have come to realize that Obasanjo's so-called economic reforms were a cloak for his, and his minions', gluttony, lawlessness, and rank hypocrisy. We now know that, while Obasanjo and his ministers sang us to distraction with the lullaby of due process, they contrived to waive the rules for their friends, fronts and cronies and to transfer billions of dollars of the collective treasury into their private pockets.

Thanks to the vigilance and tenacity of Nigerians, Obasanjo's efforts to hoodwink the nation into a tragic third term adventure met with woeful failure. With the same vigilance, tenacity and insistence, Nigerians—labor unions, intellectuals, students, peasants, the bulging army of the unemployed, the famished and the rendered-hopeless—must rise now and demand that the former president be put to trial for investing eight years in his nation's pauperization. If he is found guilty, then he should get a richly deserved second term in jail.

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