

Seeds of revolution?

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigeria may yet get its revolution, but it won't be the kind envisaged by former Vice President Abubakar Atiku. Several weeks ago, the nation's former second citizen joined eminent legal scholar, Ben Nwabueze, to warn that Nigeria was ripe for a revolution. On reading those dire predictions, one wondered whether Mr. Atiku understood what a revolution meant—and what it would take to channel any revolutionary energy in the direction of national transformation.

I doubted it very much. Just weeks after talking revolution, Mr. Atiku confirmed my fears when he hopped off to his residential address in Dubai. Anybody who takes seriously the prospects of revolutionary action must know that you can't choreograph a revolution from the lavish comforts of a foreign address.

The timing of Atiku's exit was particularly poor. He and his political party, the Action Congress, had just been shocked and awed in a rerun gubernatorial election in his home state of Adamawa. In a disturbing sign that Mr. Umar Yar'Adua is as great a danger to democracy as former President Olusegun Obasanjo, the ruling PDP gave Nigerians a preview of its perfected rigging style. So brazen was the malpractice that Atiku and his party were not even permitted the consolation of carrying a single local government area.

I was visiting Nigeria during the Adamawa poll, and spoke to a correspondent of a news agency the day of the election. He had visited several polling stations. His verdict: the ruling party had marshaled the police and officials of the electoral commission to rig with the same arrogance as the world witnessed in April of 2007.

The enterprising saharareporters.com has since disclosed that the whole Adamawa mess was meant to bring Atiku's political career to an end.

In so hastily taking flight to Dubai, Atiku became a collaborator in his own political death. How is he going to persuade Nigerians to take him seriously as a leader if Dubai and swanky Potomac, Maryland are his primary—and favorite—places of residence? His talk of revolution, suspect to begin with, came across as hollow. If a man of Atiku's means cannot stay in Nigeria to take on his political foes, then who can?

If a revolution happens in Nigeria, it's bound to come in spite of, not because of, people like Atiku. And with every passing day, Nigeria edges towards a point where an upheaval of some sort is likely to occur. We'd be lucky to have a revolution. It could be total chaos, a descent into anarchy.

The signs are writ large on the body politic. There once was a time when

many people took Yar'Adua's promise of electoral reforms at face value. Are there still Nigerians who believe for a moment that Mr. Yar'Adua is championing electoral sanity? The evidence is that the man is as committed to the do-or-die, take-no-prisoners brand of politics as Obasanjo.

Yar'Adua is fast evolving into an absentee president. He hardly speaks on policy matters. He retreats from addressing Nigerians on the core ideas, if there are any, of his regime. For a man with infirm health, he has shown scant concern for improving the nation's health care system. Despite the fact that academia was his first constituency, he has been indifferent to, if not disdainful of, the misfortunes of the nation's higher institutions of learning and of the people who labor in them.

Curiously, Yar'Adua rouses himself only when the stakes are political and partisan. If my recollection is correct, he has made campaign stops in every state where the ruling party's gubernatorial "victory" was quashed. Unable or unwilling to govern, he has found time to help his party advance its goal—most recently enunciated by Vincent Ogbulafor—of turning Nigeria into a one-party state. It is bad enough that Yar'Adua and the PDP seek such singular power. It is tragic when one realizes that this inordinate amassing of power is not attended by any lofty goals. At bottom, the whole point of concentrating power in one party is to endow one collection of pirates with the license to plunder.

Yar'Adua's conspicuous presence at run-off political rallies has encouraged INEC to re-award governorship mandates to PDP candidates. In effect, a Yar'Adua

who was once capable of contrite admission of serious flaws in his "election" is now a powerful instrument pushing the perfection of rigging. Far from demonstrating superior democratic credentials, Yar'Adua is one with Obasanjo as a deadener of democracy.

Thanks to Yar'Adua, Nigeria is ever poised on the edge of a precipice. In the name of rule of law, he has all but emasculated the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. When he opted to keep an illicitly acquired presidency, he lost the moral right to accuse Obasanjo of anything. When he told the world that he was not about to probe the man who "elected" him, he served indirect notice that the war against corruption, with all its former imperfections, was about to be altogether aborted.

Last week, Yar'Adua appointed Ms. Farida Waziri to head EFCC. The appointment was not calculated to revamp the crusade against graft and money laundering by serving and former public officials. By some credible accounts, Ms. Waziri's appointment was advocated by public officials, former as well as incumbent, who are targets of EFCC investigation. A top editor in Abuja told me in a telephone conversation that some of the nation's most corrupt politicians partied hard the day after Waziri's appointment was announced. One wonders: What manner of country permits accused people to choose their prosecutor?

In a country where thousands of impoverished criminals as well as innocents languish in jail on account of petty theft, and often even without formal trial, it is an affront to witness such open and cynical manipulation

whose purpose is to set free men and women who betrayed the trust of exalted public offices. Yar'Adua and his cohorts may take Nigerians for fools, but the Nigerian public is far more attuned than some so-called leaders suspect.

Trust Nigerians to watch with rapt attention as things unfold at EFCC under Ms. Waziri's direction. There is bound to be outrage should she begin to implement the policy of cozying up to accused former politicians, letting their lawyers draft strategy for the agency, or just standing up in court to proclaim notoriously gluttonous officials to be men and women of impeccable moral integrity.

Yar'Adua's appointment of Waziri, along with some of his other bizarre moves, underscores the predicament of political illegitimacy. His is a regime burdened by too many IOUs. In a bid to reconcile the demands of his many sponsors, he ends up shortchanging the Nigerian people who never had an opportunity to hire him in the first place.

The contradiction played itself out in the inept way in which Obasanjo's much-hyped invitation to appear before a House of Representatives' committee probing the power sector was handled. First, reports filtered out that Yar'Adua, the House leadership, as well as other "prominent" citizens, were appalled that Obasanjo was summoned. A former president, it was said, deserved more respect than to be hauled before a room of sophomoric legislators to answer questions. Never mind that the man in question may have wasted as much as \$16 billion of the nation's funds on a phony scheme to improve Nigeria's power supply.

Nigerians can see through the hypocrisy and double standards. They quietly chafe at the stipulation that respect must be accorded to former office holders who deliberately served their selfish interests at the expense of the public good. They note that nobody thinks about the dignity and humanity of hapless Nigerians who bear the brunt of criminal deeds perpetrated by public officials.

In an anti-climax, Obasanjo stayed home, pleading that he was "slightly indisposed," but sent a long epistle to speak for him. It was a prating letter filled with self-directed encomia, lectures on good manners to the uppity legislators who had the temerity to disturb his peaceful retirement in his brand new version of a hilltop mansion, ill-disguised barbs at Yar'Adua's regime and other traducers of his eight-year reign, rebukes to those who mention \$16 billion as the power sector wastage when his own calculator says the amount is in the range of \$6.5 billion, stubborn claims to being a reformer par excellence, and then this: "We have taken Nigeria to where it should be within the limited time we had."

Obasanjo's letter was long on grandiloquence and hubris but shed little or no light. Having read it twice, I still missed the section where he addressed what happened to his pledge to deliver "regular, uninterrupted power supply" by the end of 2001. Nigerians, I suspect, would have settled for any data demonstrating that his administration improved power supply even by a mere ten percent. Instead, he gave the kind of performance that characterized his dispensation: the notion that history's verdict can be rigged through inflated

self-evaluation, instead of verifiable actions. In the end, the line about “the limited time we had” stood out in my mind. Was the man telling us, ever so subtly, that we should have had had the wisdom to give him a third term? Perhaps, then, he would have paved the streets of Nigeria with gold!

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
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19. Fraud Incorporated
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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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