

Saminu Turaki's Folly

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By Okey Ndibe

Part of the tragedy of Nigerian politics is that the public arena is dominated by the likes of former Governor Saminu Turaki. This man—like most Nigerian politicians—has never met a foolish or diseased idea he didn't like. Last week, several Nigerian newspapers reported that Turaki was canvassing an extension of Umaru Yar'Adua's term in office.

The Leadership newspaper of May 23, 2008 carried the following headline: "Turaki Exposes Senate's Moves To Extend Yar'Adua's Tenure". The report began: "Former governor of Jigawa State and member of the Senate Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution,

Senator Saminu Turaki yesterday declared part of the agenda for the review of the constitution is to extend the tenure of president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua."

Turaki confided the bizarre plans in Senate correspondents. He told them that his proposed amendment would conform to the Yar'Adua regime's "Vision 2020." Turaki's revelation was something of a bombshell, since the Senate's leadership had hitherto denied that "tenure elongation" was part of their constitution review task.

To appreciate the folly of Turaki's prescription, we need to understand the man's recent political pedigree. Who exactly is Saminu Turaki? He was for eight disastrous years the governor of

Jigawa. Under his watch, the state remained steeped in underdevelopment and, some critics would contend, slipped into more pronounced infrastructural impoverishment. Meanwhile, the man distinguished himself in negative ways. He set records as a gallivanting, visionless and, apparently, grandly corrupt helmsman. While his state's misfortunes deepened, the man, according to pending charges by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, bilked the treasury of a loot in the region of N30 billion naira.

Dragged to court last year, he was reduced to a crybaby as the preferred charges were read out loud. He has become a sorry embodiment of the kind of moral malaria that propels men and women of puny ideas and wretched principles towards the space of leadership where they wreak havoc while feathering their nests. Nigerians were shocked to contemplate how one man could dip his hands into his state's treasury and help himself to lucre on such scandalous scale when all around him was collective misery and destitution. Turaki ended up spending several days in detention before he was able to meet bail terms.

During his stay in detention, several newspapers published a letter by Turaki in which he explained the destination of N10 billion out of the gargantuan sum he was accused of stealing. He claimed in

the letter that he had “invested” the cash, at the instance of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, in the third term scheme. The letter named former presidential aide, Mr. “Andy” Uba, as the recipient of the dole-out. Mr. Uba denied ever receiving a kobo from him.

Here’s the cruel irony. Turaki was one of the most fervent sponsors of Obasanjo’s third term dreams. A little more than two years ago, Turaki and his co-champions of tenure elongation for the former president were fiercely making their patently hollow case. They told us that, essentially, that Obasanjo was Nigeria and Nigeria Obasanjo. Nigeria was set on a course of certain ruination and woe if Obasanjo was not recruited, beyond the constitutionally stipulated two terms, to continue as national pilot. Their slogan was “continuity.” They argued that Obasanjo had blazed a reformist trail, and that there was not a single Nigerian, out of 140 million, who had the mettle and insight to lead.

For most Nigerians, the elaboration of the third term case was a farcical exercise, madness cloaked as reason. But so persuaded was Turaki by the third term prescription that he was willing to throw in N10 billion of funds that belonged, not to him but his state, to bribe doubters into championing the same idea.

Today, the same Turaki who argued that Obasanjo was indispensable has refined a different message. This shameless yeoman, who should have no place in a serious legislative chamber, is now vending another version of his corrupt creed. Yar’Adua has become Turaki’s indispensable man of the moment. Nigeria must be reduced to Yar’Adua.

Let’s hear Turaki make the case in his own words. He told Leadership that Yar’Adua “is a very careful person. He is a deep thinker and a listener. He always plans ahead. You know he is a lecturer of chemistry, a scientist. He is the first graduate president we have in Nigeria.” His fawning knew no bounds. He told the paper that Yar’Adua “is the first executive president we have who is a graduate...He understands international economy and scientific ways of doing things. Unlike others, he comes up prepared. Like other lecturers from ABU and other places, I know he does not like to mix things up. He always knows where he is going...I believe that scientifically he will move the country forward. You know we are in era of technology. This is the kind of president we want. I believe he will do his two terms. He has the quality of his elder brother. Look at the political bridges the elder brother built. He also does not talk too much. The people tend to misunderstand him. I think in the long run he has the capacity to succeed.”

To hear Taminu Turaki talk, you might run away with the impression that Nigerians had a genius running their affairs. Yar’Adua has spent virtually a year in office. You would not find many members of his regime, much less members of the public, willing to credit him with much in terms of concrete achievements. In fact, he has baffled many by his resolute inaction. For me, there’s no mystery to his mediocre leadership. The man had no presidential aspirations to begin with—until Obasanjo recruited him, and contrived his enthronement through awful electoral manipulation.

But trust a resourceful and desperate Turaki to try. In his mind, Yar'Adua has revolutionized agriculture and is well on his way to putting three or more sumptuous meals on every Nigerian table. Turaki alleged that Yar'Adua was now "focused on agriculture."

How so? I'll step out of the way and let you hear it straight from Turaki. Yar'Adua "has started with fertilizer. He is going to make sure that every hectare has one horsepower of tractor within three years. He is also looking at vital technologies so that we can produce food crops massively. He has taken three crops, rice, sugar and tuber. What he wants to do is, instead of importing, we produce locally."

On power, Turaki waxed with profane eloquence. He testified that "reviving the power sector" was Yar'Adua's "major policy thrust." The senator knows things that the rest of us don't: "I know that another 10,000 megawatts is coming from coal, which he is going to announce maybe next week. I don't want to preempt him. I think it is better for the president to say it himself. He has already finished on the 6,000 megawatts."

And he knows about Yar'Adua's blueprint on industrialization. Yar'Adua "wants to make Nigeria the hub of petrochemicals in Africa...He has really worked out and analyzed the Vision 2020...Each term of the two terms can be amended to seven years each. This is to allow Nigerians to really benefit from a particular government. From what I observed as a former governor who did eight years, if you don't finish your programme within the period, the next man will come and change it. So, I will

prefer two terms of seven years each...So Yar'Adua should stay till year 2021."

The man might as well have appended Q.E.D! But let's be clear on one score. Mr. Turaki's current sermon on tenure elongation, like the first, is driven by personal interest. Here is moral bankruptcy on full display. A man who turned his two gubernatorial terms into occasions for self-aggrandizement and self-enrichment is using facile flattery to escape the noose of prosecution. Just as Turaki funneled N10 billion into the doomed third term ploy, he is today willing to assault reason in an all-too-obvious effort to win reprieve from prosecution.

Turaki has a soul mate in former Governor Ahmed Yarima of Zamfara, a man who also occupies a senatorial seat. Two weeks ago, Yarima, who was elected on the ticket of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), was sighted in Sokoto at a rally of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party. He was there to shore up the gubernatorial fortunes of Mr. Aliyu Wamakko, the PDP's candidate in a run-off election.

Yarima came to political notoriety when he became the first governor to introduce sharia law, and followed through by amputating the hand of a hapless man who stole cattle. Yet, the EFCC has compiled a huge dossier on the graft allegedly perpetrated by this sanctimonious acolyte of sharia. By cozying up to the ruling party, Yarima no doubt expects to keep the hands and legs he should lose if the courts find him guilty of embezzling public funds.

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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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