

A year of dishonesty

Monday, 02 June 2008

By Okey Ndibe

One year into his questionable occupancy of Aso Rock, Mr. Umaru Yar'Adua is an illustration of the way in which language is under assault in Nigeria's public sphere. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka made the right call when he described May 29 as the anniversary of a farce. In Yar'Adua's case, it was the first birthday of a dishonest dispensation.

A little over a year ago, Mr. Yar'Adua was being sold as a man of admirable honesty. He impressed some people merely by acknowledging that the "election" that produced him was flawed. He was hailed as an uncommon kind of politician, and garlanded for his supposed stock of integrity.

Some of us didn't buy it. An honest man does not hold on to stolen or illicitly acquired goods. And Yar'Adua left no doubt that he intended to claim a presidential post that came by way of a scandalously rigged poll.

Besides, he was, to put it generously, less than honest when he claimed that the irregularities of April 21, 2007 would not have made a material difference in the presidential contest. According to him, he would still have won even if the ruling party and the electoral commission had not collaborated to distort the electoral process. That contention is a scandal of its own. The one thing worse than rigging an election is to rig one when you're assured

of victory in a transparently credible competition.

Let me illustrate: If you're certain that a friend would happily give you an amount of cash, but you decide to steal it instead, you display a degree of contempt for your friend. Even worse, you reveal something bizarre about your own psychological disposition. Why on earth would any political party, especially one that holds the advantage of incumbency, set out to steal a mandate it insists the electorate would have freely given?

The answer may lie, one suspects, in the falsity of Yar'Adua's assumption of his electoral prospects. The man was a perfect recipe for a doomed candidacy. Yes, he possessed such pluses as advanced degrees, his pedigree in the ranks of Aminu Kano's brand of progressive politics as well as the public perception that he was not corrupt.

Even so, his negatives were overwhelming. He was not known to nurse any presidential ambitions until former President Olusegun Obasanjo, looking for a reliable "protector," dusted him up. Anointed by a hugely despised former helmsman, Yar'Adua inherited Obasanjo's considerable liabilities. On the campaign trails, he came across as a confounded sophomore who cowered in the shadow of the avuncular Obasanjo who spoke for him. Yar'Adua's frail health was also a matter of public

information, and was bound to count against him, despite his comical boast that he could dominate his political opponents in squash. Finally, in eight years of running Katsina, Yar'Adua had left few positive imprints. His gubernatorial resume simply did not inspire confidence that he was equipped to take on the significant challenges of governing Nigeria.

Unless Nigerians, as a rule, are apt to make political choices that run counter to logic, Yar'Adua had everything it took to fail woefully as a presidential candidate. His party's rigging, then, must be understood as an effort to obtain by crooked means an office that Nigerians would not have bestowed by volition. What happened in April 2007 was a monumental crime that, willy-nilly, must be answered for.

The kind of electoral reforms envisaged by Yar'Adua is not an answer but an attempt to obfuscate the real issues. Speaking to a panel of reporters to mark the first year of his still contested tenure, Yar'Adua tried to re-tread a tired, bald falsehood: that the electoral reform panel he instituted would somehow provide a solution to the crises of rigged polls.

There's ample anecdotal proof that Yar'Adua is far from interested in setting Nigeria on the path to electoral sanity. One is that he buried his head in the sand as several states, including his home state of Katsina, conducted local government "elections" that could serve as manuals for how not to do elections. These were weird exercises in which the ruling party assigned itself one hundred percent of seats in contention, leaving the impression that the opposition is universally dead or moribund.

Yar'Adua has also anchored his party's "capture" of every re-run gubernatorial poll. A "president" who has not seen fit to address the nation's power crisis or to focus on the deteriorating educational sector or to elaborate a plan for dealing with comatose health care system has revealed himself as a giddy campaigner. It is as if, for Yar'Adua, power is an end in itself. He seems to share the sentiment recently expressed by his party's anointed chairman, Vincent Ogbulafor, to the effect that the evisceration of opposition parties is a laudable goal and that the ruling party intends to have an unbroken sixty-year run at the steering of the ship of state. A friend of mine, moved by the party's modesty, asked why the party would wish to be in charge only for sixty years. The best answer I could come up with was that, after sixty years, the party would have ensured that there was no Nigeria for it or any other party to ruin.

For me, Yar'Adua faced a simple test of honesty, and he flunked it. If this man were as honest as he was billed, he would have done the right thing: renounced his ill-gotten mandate. Had he had the ethical insight and moral courage to reject an office that was not freely given by Nigerians, Yar'Adua would have earned the status of a peerless national hero. He would then have placed himself in a position to truly sweep any make-up election if he had chosen to run as a candidate.

Alas, he chose to put Nigerians to sleep with the false elixir of "electoral reforms." It was, from the outset, a ploy, an exercise in political dishonesty. But while many Nigerians gorge on this nicely sautéed rogue diet, Yar'Adua and clique are

consolidating their democracy-deadening machinations. As president, Obasanjo was justly berated for treating party officials shabbily, in fact, for reducing the PDP to an adjunct of the presidency. When he didn't like the party chairman's face, he simply ordered the man to submit his letter of resignation. He did it to Barnabas Gemade and Audu Ogbe. When it came time to elect party officials, Obasanjo did not just seek to influence the process; he dictated who took what positions. And to ensure that a single vote was not cast against his chosen, he invented an anti-democratic alternative to voting. It was choosing officials "by consensus."

At its last convention in March, with Yar'Adua in charge, the party still exhibited its profound allergy to democratic means. It famously resorted to the use of the crude method of "consensus" to "elect" its slate of national officers.

Those who wonder why Yar'Adua continues to seem befuddled by the challenge of governing Nigeria ought to realize that the man is entrapped by the contradictions that produced him. The leadership of a nation calls for lofty vision and requires solid preparation. At the time he permitted himself to be drafted for the job, Yar'Adua could boast of neither. He is, then, an anomaly. After eight indifferent years in Katsina, the man might have gone into political retirement with the reputation of one who neither did dramatic good nor drastic damage. Foisted on Nigerians, he evinces the confusion that is the price of poor or non-existent preparation. And Nigerians, who have fallen so far behind and must hasten to make up for lost

ground, are saddled with the price of illegitimate leadership.

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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*.

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To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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