

Again, a season of anomy

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By Okey Ndibe

Last Sunday, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka turned 74. My initial idea was to devote this week's column to an appreciation of what the man has meant to me as an intellectual and moral mentor. His record of consistent raillery against corruption and power abuse in all their guises has to a large degree shaped my own outlook, and I have had occasion in the past to sketch my debt to the man and his magnificent example. In the end, it seemed to me possible to honor Soyinka, not by articulating those aspects of his moral activism that have had a formative and enduring impact on me, but by echoing—not for the first time—the title of his second novel as a somber and sobering caption for this week's offering.

More than at any time in its recent history, Nigeria strikes me as being mired in a season of anomy. There is a sense of the apocalyptic in the air, a hunch one has that the nation one loves so passionately, if with such a mixture of sadness, is on the brink of explosion. I'd very much wish to be wrong on this score, but I doubt it. In my reckoning, Nigeria has never been in a riskier state than it is now.

The evidence is everywhere. Mr. Umar Musa Yar'Adua, foisted on Nigerians as an illegitimate occupant of office, has so lost his grip on the levers of power that it is legitimate to wonder—as Soyinka did a

few weeks ago—whether the country has any manner of leadership.

As I write, the state of power supply in the country has sunk to new—and intolerable—lows. Nigerian citizens and businesses used to be able to count on some modicum of power supply from the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), the successor to NEPA. Not any more. The power sector is in a state of virtual “privatization,” by which is meant that consumers now must run their generators round-the-clock. Many hotels in Abuja, and most in Yola, now provide merely sporadic electricity. Not only has the Nigerian power grid failed; businesses are also witnessing incessant crashes of their private power generating equipment.

I've spoken to several Nigerians who complain of going several days without any public power supply. These are not, as one might suspect, residents of Ajegunle, Ketu or Sabon Gari, Kano; they are privileged Nigerians who live in Ikoyi, Victoria Island or Gwarimpa, a suburb of Abuja.

The talk in Nigeria is that Mr. Yar'Adua is not in charge, and nothing is truer. A measure of the man's profound confusion lies in the fact that he invited Mr. Segun Agagu, Mr. Liyel Imoke and Mr. Danjuma Goje to sit on a committee to monitor power sector reforms. The three men, all former ministers of power and

current governors, epitomize the collapse of the power sector. Under their ministerial watch, Nigeria invested billions of dollars in power projects, but has more dependable darkness to show for it. Why else would Yar'Adua ask such certified disappointments to pilot his own power expenditures if not an absence of leadership?

Nigeria's myriad economic and political problems are so grave that the nation requires a set of leaders equipped with vision, energy and a sense of momentum. Only those—a tiny few—who are gorging on the nation's oil windfall would accuse Yar'Adua of possessing a discernable vision, drive or sense of purpose. Nigeria is saddled, from all accounts, with a "leader" who merely occupies space, but has not the foggiest notion about the scale of his nation's crises, the desperate lives led by most Nigerians, and what it would take to salvage the polity.

A man like Yar'Adua is readymade to be manipulated by all kinds of retrogressive and morally retarded forces. Such manipulation is evident in the slow but steady folding up of the anti-corruption crusade. One predicted that Mrs. Farida Waziri, new head of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, was going to act an undertaker whose main job specification is to de-fang the anti-corruption agency. Despite her prating about being ready to "step on big toes," Mrs. Waziri appears set to turn the EFCC into a faux tiger.

Last week, Mrs. Waziri fired the EFCC's top and highly trained professional investigators. She then began replacing them with police officers with known and long ties to the politicians the agency is meant to prosecute. That's no way to

fight corruption; it's a cynical and dangerous strategy whose intention is to condone unconscionable looting of public funds. Where former EFCC chairman Nuhu Ribadu was guilty of selective prosecution of allegedly corrupt public officials, Mrs. Waziri may acquire a reputation as the chairperson who made a joke out of prosecution.

A retreat from waging a war against corruption is bound to compound Mr. Yar'Adua's credibility deficits. A state like the Nigerian one, which routinely jails impoverished Nigerians for picking a pocket, has no justification whatever to pursue an open policy of patting those who illicitly amass billions on the back. Such a policy is an incitement to those who are already seething about the absurdities of this madness we have styled democracy.

Nigerians are particularly unlucky to have a depraved ruling class with no sense of restraint. It is a class that steals whatever is within sight, and much that isn't. It is a class that gleefully advertises its fleet of Bentleys and Rolls Royces, but lacks the self-interest to build good roads. It is a class that delights in building obscene mansions, but won't ensure that there is adequate power or water supply. It is, in short, a foolish, contemptible class with an appetite for unearned praise.

Late last year, when I excoriated Mr. James Ibori in a column, Dr. Godini G. Darah fired a fiery response. Accusing me of mischief and worse, Darah offered an anthology of Ibori's alleged achievements during his eight-year tenure as Delta governor. Among the vaunted feats: that Ibori had built several world-class hospitals in his domain. Imagine my surprise, then, to read that the same Ibori

has approached a court of appeal to order the release of his passport to enable him to travel abroad for medical treatment. Why, I wondered silently, isn't Ibori using one of the top class hospitals he allegedly bequeathed to Deltans?

Over the last two weeks, Nigerian newspapers were awash with questionable—indeed false—adulations for public officials. In one, Governor Olagunsoye Oyinlola of Osun was lauded as a “dynamic achiever and visionary leader.” This praise because his government had commissioned an administrative building at the state university—built with public funds but named, with embarrassing immodesty, the “Oyinlola Auditorium.”

It's also a season of birthdays marked by the usual spree of overweening birthday wishes, by hangers-on and minions, splashed on newspaper advertising pages. Yar'Adua turned 57, Liyel Imoke 47, and Governor Timipre Sylva of Bayelsa, one of Nigeria's least developed states despite being a major oil-producing state, celebrated his 44th. All three men received an inundation of public birthday greetings. Yar'Adua was described as a “dynamic” leader. In one advert, Imoke was lauded for “a life full of exemplary leadership and selfless service to humanity.”

Sylva, who reportedly threw himself an opulent birthday bash, drew the most inflated flattery, fetching as many as ten congratulatory messages in one edition of *Thisday*. One “executive chairman” of a local government area called him “amiable.” Another advert, signed by several fans, alleged that his “record of service to humanity is enduring.” Another described him as “a pragmatic,

innovative and dynamic leader” who had, in a short span in office, “redefined governance in the state.” It added that he was a “true reformer and an asset” who had introduced “vibrancy and prudent fiscal management policy” in the state. The permanent secretary in the state's Ministry of Information wasted public funds to implore God to give Sylva “a clear sense of direction and the zeal to pursue and implement your well mapped out strategies and agenda of taking Bayelsa to great heights.” The most fawning message was from a man who declared Sylva “an icon,” “an example in transparency,” “my jewel of inestimable value,” “my mentor,” “my benefactor” and then this: “You have become the light for Bayelsa.” Not done, he added: “I salute your courage and sense of purpose. I hail your drive to build a new Bayelsa.”

Governors like Sylva often encourage such false and hollow encomiums. Never mind that Bayelsa, under Sylva's watch, remains a wretched place, a microcosm of Nigeria, a nation whose rich promise is dwarfed by its aborted dreams, the greed of its “leaders,” its recurrent seasons of anomy. To paraphrase what a highly respected Nigerian diplomat quipped to me last week, “when the Nigerian government promises its people hell, it delivers on time.” The question is whether such a government can withstand the accumulated rage that is incubating in the hearts of Nigerians.

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?

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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*.

Speaking Engagements

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