

# The looming shock

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*By Okey Ndibe*

That Nigeria has not exploded is something of a minor miracle; the country is certainly ripe for an explosion. One can't say what shape this is going to take, but it's clear to me that the ingredients are there for a major shock to an unbearably corrupt, unconscionably unjust order. A country founded on this depth of political criminality, economic disempowerment, judicial corruption and moral cynicism has no prayer of escaping the looming cataclysm.

An observation of several sectors of national life reveals evidence of a country straining to a breaking point.

The Punch of July 16 carried a dire report about the scandalous levels of unemployment among Nigerian youths. Captioned "64 million Nigerian youths jobless," the story was based on data provided by the Minister of Youth Development, Mr. Akinlabi Olasunkanmi. Quoting the 2006 provisional census figure, the minister stated that "Nigeria has a youth population of 80 million, or 60 percent of her total population." He then disclosed that "more than 80 percent are unemployed while about 10 percent are underemployed."

A nation that permits so many of its youths to wander about without jobs is asking for serious trouble. Mr. Olasunkanmi also indicated that, each year, only about ten percent of all

graduates—from universities and other tertiary institutions—are able to get paid employment.

Is it any wonder, then, that university students and graduates now swell the ranks of 419 scam artists, political thugs, and even armed robbers? Nigerians who bemoan the rising crime rates had better reckon that, unless and until the nation begins to empower its youths with gainful employment, the plague of crime is bound to increase geometrically.

How can there be peace in a land when youths, buffeted by unemployment, look on with forlorn despair as mindless politicians gorge on the nation's resources as if there would be no tomorrow? How long must this depraved behavior go on before there is fire on the mountain? How long the reign of injustice before the temple of iniquity is brought to ruins?

Talking about political greed, Nigerians got a new example in a vulgar transfer of public funds that took place in Gombe. Two weeks ago, Governor Muhammad Danjuma Goje of Gombe invited his predecessor to State House and handed him a jumbo cheque of N203 million. This sum—close to two million dollars—was former Governor Haladu's entitlement for (mis)ruling Gombe for four years! In addition to the absolutely unjustified payment, the former governor and his family are also entitled to medical

services paid for by the taxpayers of Gombe. In addition, he is entitled to an annual thirty-day vacation abroad, again with the people of Gombe paying the bill.

This is a brand of greed compounded by arrogance. Gombe is one of Nigeria's most wretched states. A friend of mine who lives in Abuja but does business in the state described it to me as "one of those places where hope goes to die." He also told me that, for the most part, the former governor left the state in no better shape than he found it. but let's even assume that Haladu was a great administrator who, in the favorite parlance of Nigerian politicians, "totally transformed" Gombe, does that justify the obscene package he got? At any rate, if the former governor did such a terrific job in Gombe, why must he crave an annual vacation abroad to be financed by the state?

The Gombe scandal brings several issues into focus. Why is it that mediocre as well as incompetent politicians get away with huge bonuses and perks? Nigeria is a depressing address in terms of infrastructures. Most roads are deathtraps. Most cities resemble cesspools, with neither pipe borne potable water nor sanitary facilities. In many slummy parts of Lagos and other cities and towns, residents have no access to toilets and have to defecate and pee in the open. What passes for healthcare in Nigeria is scary. Nigerians used to speak about "standby generators." Not any more. Today, generators stand in as the major suppliers of power, with little or no augmentation from public power.

Nigeria is, as far as utilities are concerned, a portrait in abject failure. Yet, the "leaders" whose ruinous policies and

"theftcraft" have brought the nation to such sorry shape have the effrontery to insist that the public pay for them to enjoy medical services or tourism in other countries designed and built by more visionary leaders and enlightened citizens. A friend told me last week that Nigeria is the way it is because its citizens permit their dehumanization. Perhaps there's a point to that conjecture.

Nigerians, long wedded to privation, are suffering as they have hardly suffered before. They have in Umar Musa Yar'Adua a man who, thrust into illegitimate power, can't seem to tell his left hand from his right. More than one year after he pledged to act decisively in the power sector, the totality of his action is to continually postpone the date for the declaration of an emergency in the sector.

Under his watch—no surprise there—the nation's enhanced crude oil earnings have not being brought to bear positively on the lives of Nigerians. He has done zilch to stem the wastage and pilfering of the nation's wealth. Once branded honest, he has displayed as much capacity for hypocrisy as the man who smuggled him into Aso Rock. A nation that needs an alert leader has been put in the hands of a sleeper. And the nation's temperature keeps rising and rising as he watches, befuddled.

It may not be long before Nigerians, in an organized or spontaneous fashion, arise to resist the kind of deranged transaction that took place in Gombe—and that takes place in other capitals and Abuja with a frequency and impunity that no sane nation can abide.

Nigerian teachers, on strike for several weeks, have been largely ignored by a

regime whose two first functionaries used to be teachers themselves. The crux of the teachers' demand is a guaranteed monthly salary of N20,000 for teachers nationwide. For this modest demand, they have been excoriated, reprimanded and humiliated. Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan, both unaccountable millionaires in dollars, have shown no sympathy for fellow teachers who are asking merely to be able to eat. Members of the National Assembly, who are paid millions of naira each month for their questionable work and lax work ethic, have made little more than incoherent noises about the strike. It doesn't bother them in the least that Nigerian pupils are losing precious time out of the classroom. The governor of Niger State—a man who also collects millions of naira per month—has even threatened to sack 15,000 teachers.

Two years ago, Nigerians were full of praise for their judiciary. When former President Olusegun Obasanjo appeared determined to reduce Nigeria to a laboratory where his whims held sway, some judges stood up to him. In ruling after courageous ruling, they went to war against executive excesses. Through their stance, they left the impression that they understood their sacred duty to act as bulwarks against coercive impunity as well as abuses and manipulations of the constitution.

Those courageous judges inspired a great deal of hope—even optimism—among Nigerians. Some proclaimed that the judiciary was awakening to its noble constitutional mandate as the interpreter of the law and protector of rights guaranteed by the constitution. They deserved the adulation.

Sadly, Nigeria is a country where hope is easily eclipsed. Last week, the same judiciary gave back all the credit it had earned, and then some. The judiciary that had inspired so much enthusiasm cast itself, robe and all, in the gutter.

It began in Osun State where an electoral tribunal, against all wise counsel, proceeded shamelessly to deliver a judgment in favor of Mr. Olagunsoye Oyinlola as the rightful winner of last year's governorship election. This verdict came in the shadow of a newsmagazine's expose of ethically questionable and extensive telephone contacts between the tribunal and Oyinlola's lawyers. Then two panels of the Court of Appeal handed bizarre victories to Senate President David Mark and Governor Sullivan Chime of Enugu. Both men's "elections" had been invalidated by tribunals.

Amidst the staged celebrations by the victors and their supporters, and congratulatory messages that appeared in newspaper with curious alacrity—in one case, the day after the verdict—many Nigerians openly speculated that cash had suborned and subverted the cause of justice. It was one of the darkest, and saddest, moments for the Nigerian judiciary in recent times.

The Nigeria of today reminds one of the Nigeria of 1983, with arrogant NPN "thieftains" clinking champagne glasses as a prostrate nation groaned and moaned. This isn't what Nigerians bargained for when they asked for democracy. This isn't democracy but some bastard impostor. When an electoral commission is seen as an appendage of the ruling party; when the judiciary abandons its role as defender of

the constitution and becomes spineless and craven; when the public perceives that judicial verdicts go the way of the highest bidder; when a few rapacious elements mock the misery of those they dispossess; and when a nation tramples on cherished values while enthroning injustice – then great danger looms.

## 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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### 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*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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