

The deflective business of power

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigeria is caught in a crisis of illegitimacy spawned by last year's joke of an election, but the Umaru Yar'Adua regime has chosen to fight imaginary enemies. Last week, the regime muzzled and then unbound Channels Television within a space of three days. The studio's crime was to have broadcast a report, sent out by some prankster disguised as the News Agency of Nigeria, about Yar'Adua's imminent resignation.

Yar'Adua's handlers quickly renounced the story, denounced its peddlers, and then proscribed Channels for disseminating it. They were right to fiercely deny a false report, but they overstepped in closing the messenger's shop. It was a clear case of overreaction that reminded Nigerians of the bleak, and only slightly darker, days of the dictators Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha.

The haste to squelch Channels Television harks back to a Nigerian-style power game. Yar'Adua fell prey to a predictable malady: he mistook a report that made him uncomfortable with a threat to national security. Every Nigerian leader (or ruler) has, to one degree or another, presumed himself an extension of the state. Proceeding from this profound misconception, each Nigerian helmsman has tended to respond to any challenge to his perch as if it were an affront against the corporate integrity of the state.

That's how Yar'Adua and his small circle of power profiteers have sought to respond to the latest manifestation of the crisis that is a concomitant of the questionable manner of his emergence. Instead of showing contrition for misstating the primary reason for his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, Yar'Adua's handlers have left the impression that those demanding candor are traffickers in mischief.

Those angling to be appointed to the cabinet, as well as those desperate to be retained in it, have taken to the sport of advertising their love for Yar'Adua. Playing doctors, some of them have declared the man to be - the phrase of the moment - "hale and hearty."

Vincent Ogbulafor, fast distinguishing himself for inane utterance, declared to reporters that "enemies" have beset Yar'Adua. Such demonizing of critics is a time-tested bugaboo, a veritable shenanigan employed by those adept at playing the power game. It is, in the final analysis, an evasive strategy, the familiar recourse of men and women who are bankrupt of imagination or logic.

Who, exactly, are these enemies that Ogbulafor indicted? One wasn't surprised that he didn't name a single person. Instead, he turned the job of naming names over to reporters. In fact, he bamboozled the reporters with the line that, chroniclers of the nation's politics,

they were in a better position to identify the enemies. In a sad reflection of the enfeebled state of the Nigerian press, there was no indication that any reporter rebuffed Ogbulafor's imposition. They apparently took the PDP chairman's latest fancy and ran with it.

One constantly wishes that Nigerian leaders would be as roused by the genuine and manifold challenges of transforming the lives of the citizenry as they are by any real or perceived threat to their suzerainty.

It bears repeating: as Yar'Adua fiddles, Nigeria is sinking deeper and deeper into a dangerous political crisis. The man who beguiled some Nigerians with his feigned meekness has morphed into a cynical politician, a man who excels at playing the game of power. His profile in Abuja suggests a man as obsessed with the trappings of power as any of those who preceded him. Meanwhile, as he invests in sharpening his power arts, it is unclear whether he understands that Nigeria's coherence as a corporate entity is daily coming unglued. The man and his cohorts may not realize it, or may not care, but Nigeria as a nation is falling apart - before our very eyes - along its frayed seams.

In the interest of fairness, it ought to be conceded that Yar'Adua did not precipitate this unraveling. Even so, there is no question that he has exacerbated it. He became part of the problem the moment he consented to inherit an office that Nigerians did not confer in a transparent exercise of volition.

By all accounts, beyond a determination to control the levers of power, he has few ideas about how to transform the polity.

Under his watch, the Niger Delta has been roiled by a deepening violence, but he has been content to sleep in the face of that and other national crises. Yet, he has made a point of stepping out to campaign for most of his party's gubernatorial candidates who faced court-mandated re-runs. In these outings, which served to lend a veneer of legitimacy to fresh rounds of electoral misconduct, Yar'Adua displayed his deepest instincts for power.

He comes across, then, as a man who has permitted himself to be carried away by the perks and preferment of power. If this wager proves accurate, then it would be easy to predict that he will end up - without question - as another in a retinue of Nigeria's power wielders treated with benign contempt whilst in office and openly mocked upon their exit.

Yar'Adua has an opportunity to do something that would be at once heroic and, in the context of Nigeria, unprecedented. Much as this might scandalize him, he ought to weigh the option of doing exactly what the false NAN bulletin alleged he was going to do. Even if he had not contemplated resignation, that idea deserves his serious thought today. He would secure his claim to the stature of a statesman by orchestrating a discussion on ways to reestablish Nigerians' sovereign right to choose their leaders.

The process that produced him as the occupant of Aso Rock was fundamentally fraudulent and untenable. That diseased process cannot be mended by protestations of goodwill, by any man's force of character, or by a pledge to midwife "electoral reforms." The only proper recipe for last year's electoral malady is not to promise, or even offer,

Nigerians credible elections in 2011; it is to correct last year's.

There's a chance that Yar'Adua is better, much better, than the confounded figure he has so far shown himself to be. Truth is, Nigerians are collective victims of last year's grand exercise in how not to conduct elections. On the other hand, Yar'Adua is both culprit and victim. For all his shortcomings, one hazards that he would have been a more sure-footed leader if his claims to office had been underwritten by the verifiable consent of Nigerian voters.

Surely, Mr. Yar'Adua has some true friends and family members who care deeply for his legacy. It's time these stepped forward to tell him the bald truth: there can be no shortcuts to remedying the crisis that bedevils Nigeria and enervates his dispensation. Nigeria's malaise demands a boldness founded on principles, not the wily gamesmanship of a man for whom power is an end.

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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