

Nigeria@48: A fool at (almost) fifty

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By Okey Ndibe

Tomorrow Nigeria will turn, by one mode of reckoning, forty-eight years of age. It is safe to forecast that this, like most of the country's preceding anniversaries, is bound to be a somber anniversary. At forty-eight, which is virtually fifty, most Nigerians remain apprehensive about the direction of their country. One of the salient statements that struck a chord with me from the moment I first heard it is the declaration that a fool at forty is a fool forever. Nigeria, at almost fifty years of age, is flirting with dangerous, tragic folly.

I am writing this column from Nigeria where I participated in a literary festival in Port Harcourt along with laureate Wole Soyinka and the Ghanaian poet, novelist and raconteur, Kofi Awoonor. For the past one week, Nigeria has been gripped by cabinet reshuffle fever and other such meaningless distractions. A do-little Umaru Musa Yar'Adua is mining this non-issue for every political advantage. Neither Mr. Yar'Adua nor any of his retinue of aides has deigned to articulate a vision, a plan, for solving Nigeria's myriad (and worsening) problems.

The press is titillated to a sickening degree by the non-issue of the moment: Yar'Adua's cabinet. Nobody is questioning why it always takes Yar'Adua too long to make routine decisions and choices, and why he ends up with a line-up of mediocrities. Few

commentators were paying attention to Yar'Adua's latest bizarre conjuration: the administration of an oath of secrecy to his aides. Few took him to task for behaving as if Nigeria was his private fiefdom. What's next? Nigerians may wake up one day to discover that their country no longer exists, that it's been turned into a secret and sold away.

Last week I drew attention to Nigerian rulers' habit of promising paradise to the citizenry, but always in the (distant) future. Hence such gimmicks as Sani Abacha's Vision 2010 which has metamorphosed into Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's Vision 2020. Most Nigerian "leaders," whether at the federal, state or local government level, allege that they are "laying the foundation" for future greatness. Yet, the country continues to decline year after year on most indices of social development. The pretenders to the mantle of leadership deploy pedantic language to urge - even exhort - the rest of us on the virtues of patience. With patience, they assure us, we stand to reap the benefits of economic reforms - in future. Be patient, they counsel, and watch them transform Nigerian education, or healthcare, or even the broad economy. They curiously always put the maturation date of their promise in some dim future. And so Nigeria has become a nation of promises that are perpetually deferred or postponed.

At any rate, few Nigerian “leaders” – if any – ever practice the patience they prescribe for the citizenry. Their conduct is verifiably abhorrent of moderation and restraint. They are allergic to any manner of self-sacrifice. They have nothing but contempt for the idea of delaying their gratification – even by a day or two. Ibrahim Babangida sold his Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) as economic elixir. He invited Nigerians to abide the program’s sapping, harsh effects and to look, instead, to the prospects of a future of plenty if not overabundance. Yet, SAP sapped the spirits of most Nigerians even as its primary sponsor wallowed in the opulence of his hilltop mansion. Today, Babangida legendary personal fortune remains a mocking reminder of promises unfulfilled.

Abacha followed suit. In the name of cleaning up the rot in the system, he used the simultaneous prosecution of those responsible for failed banks and unexecuted contracts to cow the broad class of politicians into doddering sycophants, willing to permit the goggled general to transmute into a civilian despot. Meanwhile, whilst professing to be wounded by others’ corruption and greed, our taciturn, inscrutable general presided over some of the crudest thefts of public funds. A man with a glutton’s instincts, he on occasion dispatched aides to the Central Bank to pick up billions of dollars in cold cash. As one recalls, no CBN official had the spine to expose this egregious crime. What did Abacha and his henchmen offer Nigerians in return for their exercise in primitive accumulation? Well, they dreamt up the now moribund Vision 2010.

Olusegun Obasanjo, a more recent example of an ostensible leader as a tragic

figure, should have known better. From the outset, he acknowledged that poverty was pervasive in the land and ran deep. His response was to launch two cynical campaigns: first, a so-called poverty alleviation program that became a wealth enhancement program for his minions and then a poverty eradication program that enabled him to dramatically increase the amount of money that was, well, wasted. As Obasanjo warned that Nigeria was, by objective criteria, poor, he contradicted himself by adding new planes to his presidential fleet. Unwilling to be outdone by Babangida, he made haste to secure his own hilltop mansion in Abeokuta. It is hardly surprising that, in the public imagination, he has come to epitomize hypocrisy.

The point, I hope, is by now emerging more clearly. It is this: that most Nigerians who hold exalted public offices want all the luxuries for themselves, and they want them now. They won’t wait until 2010 to reap the benefits of their so-called impending economic miracles. They are impatient to become instant (dollar) millionaires. With stolen public funds, and alacrity, they build themselves mansions in Nigeria and to buy posh homes abroad. They preen and strut and make spectacles of their expensive gadgets and gear.

Nigerian officials are experts at vending utopias. Yet, their behavior suffices to expose the hollowness of the future bliss they so blithely promise. If they are moving the nation forward, why do they steal and move public funds to foreign banks? If they claim to have totally transformed their state, why do they so shamelessly haunt foreign capitals on vacation instead of spending their time in Nigeria? If they are doing their best to

improve healthcare in their country, why do they arrange to be flown abroad at the slightest inkling of ill health? If they are strengthening schools, why are their children sent abroad for education instead of registering in the local schools?

By right, Nigerians deserve to celebrate a less mournful national birthday. But what is there to lift the spirits of citizens? It's almost fifty years since Nigerians danced in the streets, their hearts swollen with joy and excitement, to welcome the "exit" of their erstwhile imperial overlords, yet the narrative is rather desultory. Almost fifty years later, Nigerians cannot look forward to some regularity in power supply. All Nigerian cities are beset by the weight, and eyesore, of trash. The idea of credible elections still strikes many - perhaps most - Nigerians as an infeasible fantasy. Here's a nation where seventy percent of the pollution lives abysmally, where retiring professors take home a pittance as retirement benefits; yet, a serving governor recently paid himself some N200 million as retirement benefits.

There's no question that, come tomorrow, some Nigerians will greet each other with "Happy Independence." But one doubts that there will be exclamatory punch to the greeting. Or any sense of giddiness. To be at the birthday party of one who is nearly fifty and yet wedded to frivolity is to find oneself in a profoundly sad place. Tomorrow will - or should - be a day of serious reflection for every sentient Nigerian. We wonder how this nation came to this dispiriting place. And we all, individually as well as collectively, must decide what we can do to transform Nigeria. And ourselves.

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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