

The audacity of madness

Sunday, 09 November 2008

By Okey Ndibe

Days after Barack Hussein Obama made history by becoming America's first bi-racial president-elect, the rage in the U.S. and around the world is all about the audacity of hope. There's a sense that Obama's groundbreaking election signals hope for a great renewal for America, and the reign of a can-do spirit there and elsewhere.

Obama just gave the world a clinic on what's possible - everything - when willpower, tenacity and intelligence are channeled towards the realization of a lofty dream. Nigerians have reason to wonder whether their ruling elite can catch this wind of hope.

There's grave doubt.

Instead of celebrating the audacity of hope, Nigerian leaders seem content to be touched by the contagion of madness. They appear as determined as ever to sustain the audacity of impunity.

As the world hailed the political genius that produced Obama, reporters at the State House in Abuja cornered Maurice Iwu, chair of the famously misnamed Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). They asked him to speak about the lessons Nigeria could learn from the American elections. His response was pat, unabashed and arrogant: it's American officials who should be learning from INEC!

A priest friend in Abuja was the first to alert me to the latest in Iwu's album of embarrassing statements. When I relayed Iwu's response to another friend, the Zimbabwean novelist Chenjerai Hove, he recalled something Wole Soyinka had told him a few years ago at a conference: that it takes a lot of courage to be foolish.

Let's just say that Iwu has a lot of courage. A few weeks ago, he had declared that INEC was the best electoral commission in the world, "the gold standard," to quote him.

If it had been up to a man like Iwu to run the show in America, perhaps Republican candidate John McCain would have been, not the chastened loser he is today, but the winner by a record-breaking landslide. Iwu would then have justified the result on the ground that the Republican Party was the only one that mounted a serious campaign, and, besides, that whites outnumber blacks by far.

If a dispossessed Obama then insisted that his mandate was stolen, a gloating Iwu would easily have accused him of suffering from the politician's malady: being a sore loser. Obama would be censured for attempting to "overheat the polity," cynically directed to take his case to court, reminded that he's still young and should prepare to run again, and lectured to respect the verdict as a divine act. It's only in Iwu's Nigeria that God -

not mere voters – is said to be the lone giver of political power.

A day after his arrogant, though characteristic, boastfulness, Iwu came under a barrage of attack by citizens and organizations amazed at his capacity for shamelessness. He then hustled to disown – or temper – the shocking words he spewed, apparently with little thought. He said what he'd told the reporters was that America and Nigeria could learn from each other.

Reasonable and prudent as this revised version appears, Nigerians ought to be disturbed that a man of Iwu's poor judgment, tactlessness and proven incompetence still presides over their electoral matters. Iwu personifies the audacity of impunity.

A day after his election, Obama offered the post of chief of staff to Congressman Rahm Emmanuel. He also began consultations with his economic advisory team to hash out plans for dealing with America's deepening economic woes.

By moving with alacrity, Obama demonstrated that he knows what it means to be a leader. He also displayed the sense of purpose expected of a man whose run for office was fueled, not by reasons of personal aggrandizement, but by the desire to proffer solutions to problems.

Contrast Obama with Umaru Yar'Adua, the resident of Aso Rock. Where it took Obama one day to announce his choice for chief of staff and to assemble a panel of economic advisers, it's taken Mr. Yar'Adua six months (and counting) to shuffle his cabinet.

It would be forgivable if Yar'Adua's slowness translated into the choice of impeccable men and women for his cabinet. Instead, the man takes all the time in order to populate his cabinet with mediocrities, recycled failures and certified incompetents. If some of the names (of corrupt, quick-fingered ex-governors) being circulated in the press as nominees are indeed on the list, then Yar'Adua stands accused of willfully plotting to put Nigeria in (graver) harm's way.

Obama is about to assume former President Ronald Reagan's mantle as the great communicator. In countless stump speeches and more than twenty debates during his long and sometimes difficult race for the U.S. presidency, he articulated his vision for America with an eloquence and clarity that won the admiration even of his harshest critics. But how many Nigerians remember one occasion during Yar'Adua's lackluster campaign that the candidate expressed clearly why he wanted to become Nigeria's president? How many times had Yar'Adua come before Nigerians to account for the state of his so-called seven-point agenda?

Obama's mantra is "Yes, we can," a cry of hope, of redemption and renewal. Nigerian rulers also exclaim "Yes we can," but theirs is, too often, a proclamation of impunity. Men who stole billions of naira walk in and out of Aso Rock to dine with its illegitimate occupant. Yes they can! Men and women who stole elections are able to hoodwink the law or buy justice in order to sit tight in their usurped offices. Yes they can! Speaker Dimeji Bankole, who – to the best of my knowledge – has never initiated one bill to strengthen public safety in

Nigeria, spends a fortune from the nation's revenue to outfit himself and other lawmakers with bulletproof cars. Amen, yes, he can!

On Monday, November 3, a day before Obama's election, six naval ratings in the convoy of Rear Admiral Harry Arogundade pummeled a young woman named Uzoma Okere in broad daylight on Muri Okunola Street in Victoria Island. Apparently, Ms. Okere had been slow in clearing her car out of the way to enable the naval hothead to pass at the speed he liked. For her impertinence, the young woman was set upon by brave gun-wielding ratings, dragged about, stripped naked, and used as a punching bag. It was the audacity of insanity on display!

Thank goodness that an eyewitness captured the whole repugnant event on a phone camera. Posted on several websites, the assault has outraged Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike. In one breath, a Nigerian Navy spokesman said that the bestial act was being investigated. In another, he portrayed the woman as conceding to being in the wrong. He alleged that both she and her father, a retired army officer, apologized to Mr. Arogundade.

Yar'Adua is said to be outraged, and to have ordered an investigation. What does it say about a country that, five days after such savage beating of a civilian, the regime can't figure out what happened? How long does it take to investigate such a matter? And if it takes weeks to strike at the facts of a scene that unfolded in public, does it have to take a second to suspend Arogundade as well as the ratings until the facts are in?

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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