

# Nigerians should learn from Thai example

Monday, 08 December 2008

*By Okey Ndibe*

Last week a panel of Thailand's constitutional court sacked the country's prime minister, Somchai Wongsawat, and disbanded the ruling coalition. The court ruled that the country's biggest party and its two coalition partners were guilty of fraud in last December's general elections. In a unanimous judgment, the justices handed down stern sanctions. They not only banished the guilty parties, they also banned Wongsawat and 59 other top officials of the three parties from politics for five years. Twenty-four of the banned officials are members of the Thai legislature, and must give up their parliamentary seats.

The Thai court's drastic judgment was not without controversy. Some critics have suggested that the justices kowtowed to anti-government pressure mounted by the country's elite opposed to the government's populist policies that are deemed to favor the rural areas. In fact, Somchai's government, as well as its predecessor, was popular in Thailand's poverty-stricken rural areas.

Somchai is a brother-in-law to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was removed in a coup d'état in September 2006. Thaksin, who governed Thailand for five and a half years, began the policy of cultivating political support from rural Thailand. But his populist style was not enough to stem charges of corruption, nor did it save Somchai's

government from accusations of electoral fraud and perpetuation of graft.

For three years, Somchai has faced intermittent protests from people critical of his loyalty to Thaksin. Those protests took a dramatic turn two weeks ago when demonstrators staged a weeklong blockade of the country's major airports. By occupying the airports, the protesters struck heavy blows to the country's export and tourist industries. Thousands of foreign visitors were stranded in Thailand. The occupation's extensive impact was a public relations coup for the protest organizers. Their action received global media attention.

Weeks before the seizure of the airports, Thai protesters had laid siege to the former prime minister's office, forcing Somchai to relocate his government to a remote location. A prime minister without access to his office became a symbol of the government's weakness. Somchai appeared to be running his government from "exile." Then the constitutional court's verdict properly exiled him from political power.

Nigeria has a lot to learn from the Thai example.

First, there are lessons for the Nigerian people. A few months ago, after I wrote a column critical of Justice James Ogebe's shocking validation of Umaru Yar'Adua's "election" as president, I received a letter

from a self-styled “political realist.” He accused me of political naivety for expecting the judiciary to invalidate a presidential election, however fraudulent its conduction. He then rehashed the familiar arguments of those who defend the indefensible. One, that it made sense for Yar’Adua to win since the PDP controlled most of the states. Two, he claimed that Yar’Adua would have won even without rigging. Three, that to remove a man who had been sworn in as president would precipitate a political crisis that would make Nigeria unstable.

They were easily impeachable arguments. First, since most of the PDP administrations had governed disastrously, the voters would have rejected the party’s presidential candidate in a free and fair election. At any rate, the PDP conquered more states in 2003 through mindless rigging, rather than in a transparent manner.

Two, it is not true that Yar’Adua would have won absent rigging. If the ruling party felt confident at all of victory in a credible election, it would simply have mobilized the police to ensure that opposition parties did not rig. Instead, the ruling party, aware of its unpopularity, mobilized the police and military to help intimidate political opponents and to facilitate the stealing of legislative seats and several executive offices, including the presidency. At any rate, let us, for the sake of argument, concede that the ruling party would have triumphed without resorting to fraud. In that event, the PDP would be guilty of a worse crime. Bad as stealing is, it’s worse when you steal something that you could have obtained legitimately. So let’s forever banish the bald lie that the PDP

opted to steal an election it could have claimed in an honest poll.

Finally, let’s look at the contention that the invalidation of an unquestionably fraud-ridden presidential election is a recipe for national disaster. This is a peculiarly dangerous and hollow argument. It suggests that Nigeria, as a country, is allergic to doing the right thing. Why would a politically, morally and judicially correct action be deemed injurious to Nigerian stability?

Those who hijack elections are agents of instability in Nigeria. A man who steals a political office, or accepts to be placed in an ill-acquired post, is not to be trusted to transform a nation. In the case of Yar’Adua, the man had everything it took to lose the April 2007 elections. He was an undistinguished governor with a history of serious sickness. He had not nursed any presidential ambitions until a desperate Olusegun Obasanjo, smarting from the rejection of his illicit third term bid, dusted him up and foisted him on the ruling party. He was the anointed candidate of a widely unpopular president. And he did little during his campaign to define a sound vision or to display impressive political curriculum vitae.

Nigeria is today caught in the doldrums of confusion, chaos and suspended animation precisely because the ruling party illegitimately installed a bunch of unprepared men and women in stolen offices.

Members of Nigeria’s apex court have a solemn decision to make. They could act with the boldness of their Thai colleagues by squashing the certified fraud that passed for elections in April 2007. Or they

could choose to empower the forces of darkness that have kept Nigeria from achieving its promise and rising to its considerable potential. The former choice requires a sense of their duty to rescue Nigeria from the edge of moral and political perdition. The latter choice would be cowardly, a betrayal of their sacred duty, and a disservice to Nigerians, including their own children and children's children.

Those who profit from the continued exploitation of Nigeria's resources have a stake in upholding electoral impunity. A week and a half ago, the Catholic Church of Okigwe dishonored itself by celebrating Maurice Iwu, the yeoman of Nigeria's latest electoral sham. As a Catholic, I felt absolute shame. What possessed the prelates? Is God deceived?

The last time I checked, the sky has not fallen down on Thailand since its justices sent Somchai packing. The lesson is clear: Nigeria's judiciary ought to act with the judicial and moral boldness of their Thai colleagues. They should stand up and serve as bulwarks against the electoral perfidy that produced Yar'Adua. The Thai example - and, nearer home, the example of Edo State - is that the sky won't fall over Nigeria if the apex court finds the courage to rule that the PDP stole the presidency. If anything, the gloom over Nigeria will lift!

Stability will find some legroom in Nigeria only when the country begins to operate on basic positive principles, for example that of clean elections and transparent, accountable governance. In fact, the judiciary ought to instruct that those who rigged last year's elections be excluded from politics for several years. They should also disqualify Iwu from

running the show at the electoral commission.

## 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?

Read or download more titles at

<http://www.okeyndibe.com>

### 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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

---

PDF conversions done with Adobe Acrobat Professional 6.0 (US & International Patents) under license to All Hands Business Solutions, Inc.