

# Will The Abuja Crowd Downsize Greed?

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*By Okey Ndibe*

A friend called me two weeks ago to bemoan the tumbling price of crude oil. In the last six months, the price of crude oil has gone from a high of more than \$140 per barrel to under \$40 a barrel. "It means that 'ordinary' Nigerians are in for hard times," my friend said in a rueful tone.

My response jolted him. "Tell me," I challenged, "did the majority of Nigerians see any significant improvement in their lives during the seven years that crude oil prices went through the roofs?" Then I reminded him that the oil boom had simply encouraged Nigerian politicians to remove all limits to their greed. Those who preside over the ruination of Nigeria in Abuja and its thirty-six satellites affixed their mouths to the trough and went into a feeding frenzy.

Shortly after this telephone conversation, former President Olusegun Obasanjo weighed in on the outlook for 2009. In what amounted to an informal state of the union pronouncement, Obasanjo warned Nigerians to brace for a difficult 2009. Like my friend, his dire prognosis was informed by the falling oil prices.

His grim message was ironic on several levels. From 1999 to 2007, Obasanjo oversaw what must rank as one of the most wasteful exercises in statecraft anywhere in the world. His presidential "reign" coincided with a period of

dramatically rising oil revenues. And what did he do with all that windfall? Apart from handing a huge chunk of the nation's earnings to the Paris Club to settle Nigeria's questionable debts, little else. Obasanjo left a shameful legacy: no new road projects; sloppy maintenance of existing roads; a healthcare system that is nothing short of scary; poor funding of education; a power sector that steadily deteriorated; rampant corruption, and an electoral culture in which rigging is the cornerstone.

As Nigeria's oil revenues rose, Obasanjo cornered the portfolio of petroleum minister, and then instituted a culture of minimal accountability. Under his nose, a relatively low-level aide carried \$170,000 in cash on a presidential plane bound for New York City. Obasanjo even benefited from the slush; the aide in question "donated" \$45,000 in farm equipment to Temperance Farms, owned by the former president. Obasanjo, who alleged that he was allergic to corruption, defended this obscene and sordid transaction. He claimed that Andy Uba, the aide, had made a fortune as a U.S.-based businessman prior to joining his administration. It was - to put it mildly - a bald untruth.

But if the illicit ferrying of cash on the presidential jet was the limit of greed in the Obasanjo years, perhaps the former president and his minions would deserve commendation for restraint. Instead, their

greed festered and touched more crucial sectors of national life. Since Obasanjo's reluctant exit from power, the national legislature has uncovered unconscionable deals made during his two terms. A probe by the House of Representatives found out that the former president and his top aides wasted between \$5 billion and \$16 billion on power projects that remain mirages.

Another legislative committee is probing the corrupt deals and wastages in the oil sector during Obasanjo's years. That committee has heard some truly disgusting testimony about the manifold ways in which the Obasanjo administration frittered away Nigeria's oil earnings.

Curiously, that committee has gone into "quiet" mode. A friend of mine recently spoke to a member of the committee and asked how the probe was proceeding. The member shook his head, gave a cynical grin, and volunteered that "nothing will come out of it. There's too much money involved." When my friend pressed further, the legislator told him that too many members of the committee had been "confused" by huge bribes. "There's too much money flying around us," he concluded.

Part of the problem is the reluctance of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's handpicked successor, to confront the egregious looting during his benefactor's reign. Yar'Adua is too handicapped by the crisis of political illegitimacy to lift a finger and accuse his predecessor. At any rate, his own government has squandered two years with little or no concrete achievements to its credit.

The challenge now is not whether Nigerians can manage to tighten their belts in the face of harshening economic realities. Nigerians' belts are permanently tight, whether the nation is earning a lot or little. The truth is that Nigeria is cursed with "leaders" who are no better than common criminals. They are looters disguised as leaders.

At a time when oil earnings seem set to crash even more, the question is whether the vampires in power can learn, for the first time, to tighten their own belts a little. That would entail setting their greed to the declining rates of crude oil earnings. If they don't do this, they may finally push the belt-stifled 'ordinary' Nigerian to wake up and say "Destroy this temple!"

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated..*

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