

# The State of War

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*By Okey Ndibe*

For most practical purposes, the Nigerian state is battering and assaulting its citizens. It is time the citizens awoke to the reality of the ongoing war, and fought back.

Recently, the Umaru Yar'Adua regime revealed its plan to remove all subsidy from petroleum products. That announcement amounted to an unprovoked intensification of the bombardment of Nigerians.

There's no better time for professional groups, labor unions, students, street vendors, farmers, the unemployed to rise and tell Yar'Adua that they, not he, own Nigeria.

Barack Obama and other true leaders spend their waking hours thinking up with ideas to cushion the harsh impact of the bleak economic times on their citizens. Meanwhile Yar'Adua and his cohorts, whose political legitimacy is far from resolved, are drumming up callous ideas to make life more brutish, more nasty, shorter for Nigerians.

Labor unions ought to serve notice of their intention to call an immediate nationwide strike the moment the insouciant bunch in Abuja carries out

their threat on the removal of petroleum subsidy.

Yar'Adua recently made a fanfare of taking a pay cut. Nigerians should not be impressed one bit. The man lives in the nation's prime mansion for free. He doesn't pay a dime for food or drinks, nor does he know the pain of scrunching around for change to pay the electricity or water bill. He's a kept man, the tab for his every need and fancy as well as that of his family picked up by 140 million Nigerians.

It's sheer arrogance and insensitivity for such a man to contemplate adding to Nigerians' collective misery. As if his much-abused fellow citizens were not too woe-be-tide as it is.

Why is it that "ordinary" Nigerians are made to suffer through economic booms and dooms? For ten years, crude oil prices rose and rose and Nigeria earned unprecedented levels of revenue. But a visitor to Nigeria would not have known it. Hunger still stalked the cities and villages of Nigeria. The governments, federal, state and local governments - often under the control of the bigger riggers - continued to shirk their responsibilities. Roads remained in a shambles. Hospitals were ill-equipped.

Citizens had to dig wells or sink boreholes to take care of their water needs. The power corporation perfected its supply of darkness. Nigerians simply did not see any evidence that their country was raking in more billions of dollars in oil revenue.

That's not exactly correct. The hapless citizens watched in shock and awe as their politicians in Abuja made upward adjustments in their greed to suck up the slush. The stealing orgy set new records. The looters bought up plush real estate in South Africa, in Dubai, in England. A lowly presidential aide transported \$170,000 in cash on a presidential jet bound for New York City. In a country where the law states that cash exports exceeding \$10,000 must be reported, Nigerian law enforcement agencies stated -with no sense of shame - that no law had been violated.

Yar'Adua could argue that he was not running the shop when this obscene run on the nation's resources took place. But that argument would be easily punctured. The man has carried on an open love affair with the governors and other officials who captained the looting. He dines even with convicted rogues, instead of instructing state prosecutors to seek harsh jail terms for the contemptible fools.

Nigeria is buffeted by the same grave economic crisis that has gripped the rest of the global economy. The situation calls for the kind of energy and engaged, visionary leadership that Yar'Adua, quite simply, cannot provide. When a man has few ideas of his own and is confounded

by the scale of a problem, it's easy for opportunistic advisors to persuade him to make sacrificial lambs of the same segment that bears the brunt, in good times as well as bad.

Now, though, Nigerians should resist being put upon. Labor unions, students and other organized sectors of Nigerian life ought to tell Yar'Adua a few straight truths. They should tell him that the reason most workers can't afford a decent living standard is that politicians steal too much. Before Yar'Adua touches petroleum subsidy, he ought to ask Obasanjo, Segun Agagu and Liyel Imoke to explain what happened to the billions of dollars spent on the power sector. He should instruct the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to get cracking with the arrest and prosecution of incumbent and former officials who betrayed the trust.

Yar'Adua should stop handing out millions of naira to legislative leeches in the name of constituency allowances. He and state governors should immediately repudiate the scandal called security votes. It's sheer scam when state governors can spend more than N200 million in so-called security votes with no obligation to account for it. Obama wants the wealthiest Americans to pay more in taxes to help lift the American economy from the doldrums. Yar'Adua? He's asking the poorest Nigerians to sacrifice even more. Is he for real?

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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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