

Taking a measure of Nigeria in London

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By Okey Ndibe

Anybody who wished to gauge what Nigerians think about their country's bizarre brand of "democracy" should have been in London on May 29.

I was there as one of the speakers in a symposium tagged "The State of the Nigerian Nation." It was clear to me that Nigerians had exhausted their patience with the coterie of criminals who have hijacked their nation, and that something is about to give.

Headlined by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, the event was organized by the Nigerian Liberty Forum. The NLF, whose public face is Kayode Ogundamisi, exemplifies what can be achieved when committed, mostly young, citizens come together to exclaim no to the diabolical bunch who're mortgaging their country's interests.

Given many Nigerians' tendency to quickly discount the perfidious acts of their so-called leaders, it's comforting to behold a group that's sworn not to forget. Instead, the NLF maintains a formidable sense of the multiple ways in which Nigeria has been betrayed. The group's goals include advocacy of "good governance, accountability and the enthronement of democracy" and the organization of "peaceful public protests against corrupt Nigerian practices."

It has recorded some remarkable feats. When Umaru Yar'Adua visited the

United Kingdom, the NLF mobilized Nigerians to come out and remind the man's British hosts about his tainted mandate.

More recently, the group pulled off a successful rally that sent former President Olusegun Obasanjo cowering for cover. Obasanjo had been invited by the London School of Economics to talk about his role as a United Nations' peace envoy to the Congo. The NLF felt that, given Obasanjo's record as president, his name and peace should never be mentioned in the same breath.

True, the NLF fell short of persuading LSE to withdraw its invitation. Even so, its members ensured that Obasanjo's inflated and delusional credential as a peacemaker was eloquently called into question.

In a sense, the symposium was proof that the NLF is far from just reactive. Its lineup of speakers was morally august. There was the former Chair of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission Nuhu Ribadu. Soft-spoken in voice and wiry in appearance, Ribadu's message resonated deeply with the audience. In what amounted to a cry from the heart, he implored Nigerians, one, to reject the false creeds those in power employ to divide and conquer and, two, to reclaim their country from the hands of its despoilers.

There was Femi Falana, one of Nigeria's most intrepid lawyers, whose insider account of the recent electoral shame in Ekiti reminded the audience about the depth of the ruling party's determination to emasculate the Nigerian electorate.

The unprepossessing Sowore Omoyele, publisher of saharareporters.com, proved a crowd favorite. Omoyele's website, which combines hard-edged investigative reports with an iconoclastic style, has endeared him to many Nigerians who relish the way he exposes the cupid underbelly of the ruling class. He challenged Nigeria's traditional media to awaken to the need to identify with the cause of the masses or risk losing relevance.

Josephine Amuwo, who helps run a highly successful London-based agency that offers training and a variety of other services to women, gave a short but spirited testimony about her passion for Nigeria and her belief in its capacity to rise from the morass and achieve its promise. Affiong L. Affiong, a former student activist, spoke movingly about the role of women in the struggle to liberate Nigeria.

The ever-ebullient Kennedy Emetulu and the energetic Professor Sola Adeyeye gave rousing performances as moderators of the morning and afternoon sessions respectively.

So much was at stake at the London symposium. That it was held on May 29, a day Obasanjo presumptuously declared "Democracy Day," was at once fortuitous and added to the dramatic temperature.

Soyinka's speech skewered the notion that May 29, rather than June 12 (when

Nigerians held what's acknowledged as the finest election in their country's history), merits designation as the day democratic aspirations are to be celebrated.

There was, besides, a running subplot to the symposium that lent it some air of drama. Prior to my arrival in London, I'd received feelers that the Yar'Adua regime was hostile to this gathering of Nigerians to take stock. In London, I was shocked to discover how chagrined Abuja was at the prospect of this meeting. Under pressure from the Nigerian High Commission in London, the London Metropolitan University pulled out as co-sponsors of the event.

When Sowore, Ogundamisi and I sat down in the studios of BEN TV to do a live interview on the conference, the audio became unaccountably mute. I later learned that the High Commission had registered its displeasure with the Nigerian owner of the studio for letting subversive elements appear on his TV. At the symposium, a man told me that the commission had signaled that any Nigerian groups that attended the event courted sharp censure.

Despite these shameful efforts, the hall was packed from morning till the event's conclusion. Still, the government's attempt to undermine the symposium struck me as powerful proof that our democracy is yet deformed.

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 and political activist. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." He 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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