

# A fertilizer of corruption

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*By Okey Ndibe*

One of the oddest jokes in Nigerian politics is that Umaru Yar'Adua fancies himself a crusader against corruption. In speeches and interviews, the man proclaims himself a foe of the corrupt. His wife, Turai, weighs in from time to time with her own railing homily on graft. His deputy, Goodluck Jonathan – a man whose wife was twice caught with an unexplained horde of cash during his brief as Bayelsa governor – is known to mount the pulpit and declaim against those who put filthy hands in the public treasury. Yes, even Michael Aondoakaa, Yar'Adua's beloved Attorney General and Minister for Justice, is fond of theorizing on the subject corruption.

It all makes for a tragic brand of hilarity. When a man like Yar'Adua and his associates make a fetish of chastising the corrupt, what else to do but to dolefully shake one's head?

Yar'Adua has perfected the practice of fighting corruption with an arsenal of cold, hollow speeches. Each time he, or a member of his posse, utters a speech on the alleged war against corruption, Nigerians and the world see hypocrisy personified.

Two years ago, a vindictive Olusegun Obasanjo, smarting from Nigerians'

resounding rejection of his illicit third term aspirations, decided to wangle Yar'Adua into the Presidency. Yar'Adua came packaged as a robe that beguiled the gullible. It was alleged that he was a man of great honesty and integrity. He was even sold as a reform-minded politician with a dash of radicalism. It was speculated that, as a bona fide university graduate, he would bring a new sense of empathy, urgency and vision to tackling the crises besetting the nation's deprived sectors.

The Yar'Adua hype was built on falsehood and sustained by wooly thinking. Some of us asked how an honest man would permit himself to be the beneficiary of stolen goods – which is how, in the end, history will remember Maurice Iwu's 2007 "elections." If Yar'Adua was driven by some deep convictions, why was he so reluctant to step forward at campaign rallies to articulate them? Why did he appear content to cede the podium, time and time again, to Obasanjo to define him? If this former governor was a man of vision, how come Nigerians had heard little about his gubernatorial successes in Katsina?

For a brief moment, Yar'Adua seemed determined to maintain the myth of a

focused, thoughtful leader with scant regard for the pomp and pageantry of office. He proclaimed himself a servant-leader, enunciated a seven-point agenda, and declared his allergy to corruption. I didn't buy it for a minute.

By the time he finished his first year of tenancy in Aso Rock, Yar'Adua had revealed himself for who he truly is: above all, an inept administrator thoroughly confounded by the significant challenge of running a complex behemoth like Nigeria. He has also dispelled any doubts from the minds of some who wondered if an honest man would accept a mandate tainted by pervasive fraud. In shamelessly leading the assault on Ekiti during the re-run governorship polls, Yar'Adua has buttressed his commitment to an electoral culture founded on open violation of the public will.

More than anything, Yar'Adua's true portrait has emerged in the bizarre company he keeps.

Last Sunday, Punch reported that the Yar'Adua regime had funneled a N40 billion fertilizer contract to Notore Chemical Industries, a company reportedly owned by former Governor James Ibori of Delta.

The paper speculated that the contract was seen as Yar'Adua's design to reward the former governor "for allegedly bankrolling [Yar'Adua's] campaign in the 2007 presidential race."

Yar'Adua's latest largesse to Ibori fits into a telling pattern. Ibori is docked for

corruption, accused by the government's anti-corruption agency of pocketing a significant proportion of state funds during his eight-year run as governor. But you would not know this from the way Yar'Adua and his top lieutenants coddle Ibori, extending to him the kind of preferment worthy of the most admirable citizens.

Ibori and Lucky Igbinedion (a now convicted ex-governor) were put on Nigeria's official delegation to the Beijing Olympics. That meant that these two men, accused of grave betrayal of the public trust, were flown to China, quartered in an expensive hotel, and feted at public expense. More recently, the ruling party (no doubt with Yar'Adua's blessing, if not at his urging) declared Ibori one of its revered "elders."

In a sentiment that exposed the depth of crass thinking in the Yar'Adua regime, Olu Lipede, a spokesman for the Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, told Punch reporters that "Ibori is a Nigerian and he has every right to do business." Why hasn't Yar'Adua ordered his staff to comb Nigeria's jails and identified the most hardened criminals to line up for plum jobs in the government? Are these criminals any less Nigerian than the criminals who hang out in Aso Rock?

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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*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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