

# The Real Amnesty

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Last week, a correspondent of Radio France International hunted me down in Toulouse, France, where I was making a short visit to relatives. The reporter sought my opinion about Umaru Yar'Adua's amnesty for militants in the Niger Delta. Did I think, he asked, that the gesture was going to address the festering violence in Nigeria's oil-rich hub?

My short answer was no. It doesn't take the gift of clairvoyance to realize that Yar'Adua's amnesty, however well meaning, is akin to using paper to cover deep cracks in a wall. Sooner or later - in fact, sooner than later - the cracks will show once again.

Yar'Adua's amnesty, I told the reporter, does little to fix the underlying causes of the crisis in the Niger Delta. These causes include decades of economic injustice, the ecological devastation of the area, and the shortsighted employment of military power to dispose of legitimate agitation for reparation. Add to the mix the irresponsible recruitment and arming of the area's jobless thugs by rogue politicians - most of them members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party - and what emerges is a perfect recipe for social combustion.

A permanent solution to the malaise in the delta, as well as the broader breakdown of law and order in the nation, lies in pursuing an agenda of accelerated economic development, the restoration of wholesome values, and humanization of the Nigerian space. Violence is, in the end, the recourse of desperate, hopeless, or broken people. Sadly, Nigeria has become a factory that mass-produces desperate, hopeless and broken citizens.

Are Yar'Adua and his cohorts doing anything to reverse this trend, to ameliorate the brutish conditions under which Nigerians writhe and seethe? Here again, the answer is no. Are they capable of envisioning a transformed Nigeria? Yet again, no.

There are a few exceptional figures in Nigeria's public life. For the most part, however, the nation is in the hands of wretched pretenders, flight-by-night mediocrities and contemptible usurpers whose mission is to gorge on the public trough. These men and women are so daft that they hardly realize how perilously close they have brought the nation to the edge of unspeakable disaster.

Yar'Adua is a shadow of the kind of visionary leader that Nigeria needs, and urgently. The man doesn't come across as understanding the depths of the crisis in which the nation is embroiled.

Far from grasping the nature and scope of the nation's challenge and the rudiments of social engineering required to turn things around, he has at every turn exacerbated the crisis.

His coddling of the nation's corrupt league is nothing short of scandalous. It's still open to debate whether his amnesty to the delta's militants was a success at any level. But there's no question that his rule has entailed a bounty of amnesty to those who stole Nigeria to penury over the last ten years.

Under his watch, former occupants of public office who once dreaded the prospect of prosecution by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission have regained their swagger. Confident in Yar'Adua's harmlessness, men and women who amassed illicit wealth by betraying the public trust have since crawled out of their cocoons. They've taken to strutting the stage in obscene pride.

The real beneficiaries of Yar'Adua's undeclared (but more real) amnesty are his former gubernatorial colleagues lifted into cabinet positions in his regime, despite the existence of massive dossiers of their culpability in money laundering. Other profiteers from Yar'Adua's amnesty are past and current office holders who have been spared fear of the consequences of corrupt acts. In the

current dispensation, few undertakings are as safe and sanction-free as graft and money laundering.

Herein, then, lies Yar'Adua's albatross. If he wishes to reduce militancy and decriminalize the Niger Delta, then it behooves him to show a comprehensive distaste for corruption, a crime that acts as manure for the violence and instability in the Niger Delta. You can't be fraternizing with high-intensity criminals like corrupt ex-governors and be preaching to militants and relatively low-grade criminals to disarm. Disarm for what? To watch in stupefaction as politicians fritter their resources?

Yar'Adua's policies and his body language do not bespeak a man who wishes to lift a finger in anger at his corrupt fellows. Knowing that about the man, one can confidently aver - as I told my French radio interviewer - that the amnesty plan was dead on arrival.

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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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