

Soyinka, Chimamanda and Other Burning Issues

By Valentine Obienyem



The last election in Nigeria was the worst in its electoral history. Have you asked yourself why it was only APC and Sen. Ahmed Bola Tinubu that failed to condemn non-transmission of results from the polling booths to the central server even before the results were announced? The election has created deep divisions among Nigerians, who belong to diverse ethnic and religious groups because Tinubu charged his supporters to secure victory for him by any means possible. Alas, we have seen how his followers used the ethnic and religious card, Ayo masquerade festival, guns, cudgels, threats, and psychological warfare to secure unmerited victory for him. The unconscionable action of Tinubu was a clear example of his readiness to bring Nigeria down owing to his vaulting political ambition. The practical disfranchisement of Nigerians had removed the mental stimulus that comes from free political activity and a widespread sense of liberty and power. Today, Nigerians feel that they are no longer free. He is not done yet; his destruction of Nigeria goes on apiece. He has succeeded in pitching Nigerians, including the members of the epistolary family, against one another. With his attitude and desperation to acquire political power at any cost, it is safe to assume that he is ready to lead the country to an ignominious bondage, if not political cul-de-sac.

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classic exemplification of this adage, "birds of a feather..." I call three of them the Odysseus of our time. Those in love with classics will recall that Odysseus would hardly speak without lying, or act without treachery. To this "Odysseuan" inclination, some Nigerians add an unabashed mendacity. Why would old men tell lies or engage in acts of dissimulation of facts without compunction? Why would they deliberately turn white to green and are supposedly comfortable with themselves? They represent the inveterate dishonesty of mankind. All their efforts are geared at trying to present a flawed presidential election, which is, unarguably, the worst in our political annals, as the freest and fairest presidential election that has ever taken place in Nigeria.

Doubtless, Mr. Peter Obi ran the most engaging campaign. He traversed all the states. And, in some cases, he visited three or four towns in each of the states. His campaign speeches were polyphonic sermons calling the nation to progressive ideas, with clear roadmap of how he would move the country from consumption to production. With his evident distaste for the crudities of political strife, those that are desirous of the good of the country supported and followed him. On the contrary, the supporters of Tinubu are mostly those looking fretfully for what they will gain. For these people, it does not matter if an ex-convict or a drug baron becomes the president of the country. Having seen Obi as the symbol of what is lacking in Nigeria,

most Nigerians, wearied of the ugly status quo, started expressing their support for him through the ubiquitous "Obi-dient" movement. How do we define the "Obi-dient" movement? They represent a flame that set the mind of Nigerians afire with the dream of political emancipation. What some do not realise is that "Obi-dient" has become a byword for all those who are disappointed with the condition of Nigeria, which include a sizable proportion of the elderly demograph. We tend to ascribe the "Obi-dients'" zealotry to the youth population of the group because they are naturally more impulsive, inflexible in resolution, resourcefully minded and always rearing to go just as the elders of today reared to go in the 60s. Who loves what is happening in Nigeria? Who wants an Escobar to become his President? Who enjoyed the stultifying effect, which the recurrence of Buhari's ill health had on governance in his almost eight regrettable years in the saddle of leadership? The prospect of our having a similar dose of Buhari's political maladministration is threatening to repeat itself on a more sinister proportion?

At every stage of the election, the principals, including Mr. President and the INEC chairman assured us of its sanctity. At last, Nigerians were ready to freely choose their leaders. However, as soon as the election started, it became obvious that all they did: the speeches, the monetary policies and the promises were subterfuges to deceive the people. Sad to observe that after the election, all the forces that had been beaten down by the former President Goodluck Jonathan – ballot snatching, re-writing of results, shedding of blood, non-interference by the Presidency – are rampantly resurgent. What manner of country are we building for posterity?

All in all, as amply presented in his letter to President Joe Biden of America, Tinubu's "victory" did not follow due process. If such brazen robbery of the mandate of the people by the magnificent thief is allowed to stand, others, as we witnessed in the follow-up election, would try to profit from his example or better his instruction.

I have read many Nigerians lament about the election. As far as I am concerned, one of the most reasonable is the analysis of Mr. Atedo Peterside. One could see in his analysis a very committed and objective elder thinking about the future of his country by not supporting anything that would endanger it. I have also listened to the interventions of Pa Ayo Adebayo, who I call the number one "Obi-dient", when understood from the perspective of Nigerians who are exasperated with the status quo and clamour for a change based on equity and justice. A few days ago, we also listened to Prof. Wole Soyinka. His viewpoint aroused one of the bitterest tempests the "Obi-dients" are still

contending with.

For obvious reasons, I am not in support of Soyinka's bashing. Soyinka is among the revered men of letters, who have brought honour to the country. I say this with the greatest sense of responsibility. I have listened to him talk in numerous fora. I was there when he spoke at Achebe's colloquium at Brown University. I was there when he addressed the Biennial African Philosophy World Conference in Tanzania. Each time he spoke it appeared as if the rising sun beamed from his hair; one could see the depth in him. His viewpoints are always characterised by clarity and logic of thought, fitness and pungent of phrase, especially when denouncing autocracy and bad government. The Prof. is evidently a paragon of learning, a compendium of letters, a poet of parts and a scholar of subtlety.

His being comfortable in the company of political myrmidons like Fani Kayode, Festus Keyamo, and Bayo Onanuga, is a classic exemplification of this adage, "birds of a feather..." I call three of them the Odysseus of our time. Those in love with classics will recall that Odysseus would hardly speak without lying, or act without treachery. To this "Odysseuan" inclination, some Nigerians add an unabashed mendacity. Why would old men tell lies or engage in acts of dissimulation of facts without compunction? Why would they deliberately turn white to green and are supposedly comfortable with themselves? They represent the inveterate dishonesty of mankind. All their efforts are geared at trying to present a flawed presidential election, which is, unarguably, the worst in our political annals, as the freest and fairest presidential election that has ever taken place in Nigeria.

When we read some of the things he did in his youth, including the seizure of a radio station, we shall admit that he is also an incarnate Mars, dedicated to war and delighting in it. Though he talks brilliantly about literature, but he usually falls into a hundred errors when he wanders into politics as he did recently. While we take exception to his stand, we must not forget his genius. It is on this that I join Nigerians to condemn his reference to "Obi-dients" as fascists. I do not personally know what he meant by that because fascism and dictatorship are near alien. For me, fascism is more of the peculiar quality of a dictatorship inclined towards suppression of the opposition, criticisms and promotion of "divide et impera" (Divide and rule). By taking power by force using the instrument of the state, trying to pitch

the ethnic groups against one another, who is more dictatorial and fascist than Tinubu? This should be the central question. We catch the colour of his spirit by his readiness to buy people's conscience by any means.

So, rather than go after Soyinka, I think we have to mourn his inability to situate fascism in its rightful context. It was so bad that he even joined them in believing that the "Obi-dients" wants to control the judiciary. What did they do other than suspect that the man who was shouting go to court may know something we do not know that was pushing him towards that course of action? What "Obi-dients" are doing is reminding the judiciary that it behoves them to clear the mess created by politicians by being blind in dispensing justice.

The judiciary is essentially an institution created as an arbiter of justice. Over the years man was more barbaric than human. To transmit greed into thrift, violence into argument, murder into litigation, and suicide into philosophy has been part of the task of civilisation. To settle the case of Tinubu would have been through duel with Obi or other primitive ways. However, by courtesy of civilisation we now have the judiciary for that work. If the judiciary fails to do so, that would be taking us back to the Stone Age.

Expectedly, many people were shocked by his view- point. Coming at a time the Minister who lies unsympathetically by means of pompous rhetoric was singing the song of treason, at a time they badly doctored his video as to pass for fake and at a time there appears to be a fresh understanding to employ all available ammunition to run Obi out of town, one would wonder what is extreme about the reactions of the "Obi-dients."

But how do we react to Soyinka as a person? Which of us has the commanding presence to match him word for word? This is where the intervention of the future Nobel Laureate, Chimamanda Adichie was soothing and welcome. Shocked by the crimes of Tinubu, disheartened by the selfishness of his defenders and appalled by the credulities of political engagements, she wrote her famous letter to Biden.

Employing a prose sometimes involved or flowery, but for the most part eloquent and vigorous, pungent and vivacious, and clear as a mountain stream, she described with startling candour that characterises it to the end, what some people are passing for election in fascinating details:

"Most egregious of all, the electoral commission reneged on its assurance to Nigerians. The presidential results were not uploaded in real time. Voters, understandably suspicious, reacted; videos from polling stations show voters shouting that results be uploaded right away. Many took cellphone photos of the result sheets. Curiously, many polling units were able to upload the results of the House and Senate elections, but not the presidential election. A relative who voted in Lagos told me, "We refused to leave the polling unit until the INEC staff uploaded the presidential result. The poor guy kept trying and kept getting an 'error' message. There was no network problem. I had internet on my phone. My bank app was working. The Senate and House results were easily uploaded. So why couldn't the presidential results be uploaded on the same system?" Some electoral workers in polling units claimed that they could not upload results because they didn't have a password, an excuse that voters understood to be subterfuge. By the end of the day, it had

become obvious that something was terribly amiss.

No one was surprised when, by the morning of the 26th February, social media became flooded with evidence of irregularities. Result sheets were now slowly being uploaded on the INEC portal, and could be viewed by the public. Voters compared their cellphone photos with the uploaded photos and saw alterations: numbers crossed out and rewritten; some originally written in black ink had been rewritten in blue, some blunderingly whited-out with Tipp-Ex. The election had been not only rigged, but done in such a shoddy, shabby manner that it insulted the intelligence of Nigerians."

Many Nigerians see her intervention as timely and apposite. At a time, some big, global voices were trying to sound funny, trying to still resentment by muttering "treason", her exhilarating pen entered like energising yeast into the rising body of analysis of the Nigerian elections.

At home with Nigeria and noting the weaknesses that has held her down, Chimamanda, in her usual genial leisureliness, ventured into an area the epistolary fraternity pretend not to hear about. Again, let us hear her:

"Compromised is a ubiquitous word in Nigeria's political landscape—it is used to mean "bribed" but also "corrupted," more generally. "They have been compromised," Nigerians will say, to explain so much that is wrong, from infrastructure failures to unpaid pensions. Many believe that the INEC chair has been "compromised," but there is no evidence of the astronomical U.S.-dollar amounts he is rumored to have received from the president-elect. The extremely wealthy Tinubu is himself known to be an enthusiastic participant in the art of "compromising"; some Nigerians call him a "drug baron" because, in 1993, he forfeited to the United States government \$460,000 of his income that a Chicago court determined to be proceeds from heroin trafficking. Tinubu has strongly denied all charges of corruption."

Chimamanda spoke like a person who was either in Nigeria or followed the election very closely. Many Nigerians did likewise, including the Lord Justices. They do not live in other planets, such that it is wrong to say that Alhaji Ahmed Datti statement was a sort of gladiatorial challenge. Knowing fully what happened in Nigeria, Nigerians are of the opinion that the case should be concluded before the 29th of May. We cannot afford a character that has ugly baggage to become the president of Nigeria even for a second. What moral authority would he have to do many things a good president is expected to do, including fight against drug trafficking?

The judiciary should be encouraged to restore to Nigeria what they bargained for. Until this is done, we must rank the election as among the darkest blot on elections' record in Nigeria.

I, therefore, join Chimamanda in urging Biden and other world leaders not to recognise or congratulate Tinubu. Her conclusion is apt: "Congratulating its outcome, President Biden, tarnishes America's self-proclaimed commitment to democracy. Please do not give the sheen of legitimacy to an illegitimate process." Let this speak to the conscience of other world leaders and, indeed, all men of goodwill.

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