

The sense in Obasanjo's endorsement of Peter Obi

By Dan Agbese



The trouble with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo is that he sees, he talks, and he ruffles feathers. He does not care whose feathers are ruffled or which self-preening peacock he has reduced to an ordinary cock with the stroke of his pen. He ignores those who argue that he has had the country by the ears since February 13, 1976, when he stepped into the shoes of the assassinated head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Murtala Ramat Muhammed, and much later as a civilian president and that it is time for him to padlock his lips, leave the stage to younger men with the self-conviction of their leadership qualities and abilities. He refuses to padlock his lips. He keeps talking and his detractors keep squirming.

Sure, there are times when Obasanjo

carries on as if he is the ultimate repository of knowledge in the country and that those who wish to lead the country would do well to worship in his shrine and drink deep from his fountain of knowledge. Sure, his tendency to beat his chest is a turn off for those who believe that some modesty is a more fitting garment for him than the sound of chest beating. And sure, I suppose the former president believes that if his way through the pearly gates were to be blocked by St Peter, it would be because he saw things going wrong in the country and kept quiet; he saw his country pretty much unsteady on its feet and he thought it was dancing owambe.

Obasanjo's latest disruptive intervention is his endorsement of the Labour Party presidential candidate,

Peter Obi. He has done nothing more than exercised his constitution-given right to support a presidential candidate he believes merits his support. But being Obasanjo, he put his head in the hornets' nest. The howling is deafening. They are howling, calling him names because he did not support who they wanted, perhaps his fellow Yoruba man, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, APC presidential candidate.

It is a sentiment that Obasanjo has never shared. Nobody tells the man what to do. He has always endorsed a presidential candidate of his choice. He endorsed Goodluck Jonathan in 2011; he endorsed Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. Each man relished his support and enthusiastically welcomed it. But you cannot take Obasanjo's support for anyone for

granted. They were his men so long as they were committed to good leadership and did what was right and proper to move the nation forward as one nation, one people and one destiny. When, therefore, Jonathan and Buhari each deviated from the narrow path of good governance, the former president reached for his whip.

In his informed view, each of them failed to rise up to the challenges of nation-building. He wrote letters to them, pointing out where each went wrong and underlined the need for them to retrace their steps. But they individually resented his pieces of advice and put them down to his unnecessary interference in their presidential duties. It was a bad mistake.

What I find remarkable about Obasanjo is that there is a calculated method to his disruptions. Why did he endorse Obi, a man whose chances of dislodging the APC and PDP behemoths, not many people are willing to bet on it? I cannot pretend to know why; only Obasanjo can give us a definitive answer. My guess is that at least two things must have motivated him to take the decision. One, his action is consistent with his policy of building a nation that respects and makes deliberate allowances for every tribe, big and small, to aspire to the highest political office in the land.

Two, it is consistent with his commitment to the management of our diversities. You cannot build a nation by either ignoring or consigning a tribe or section thereof to a mini political Siberia. In 2007, he showed that commitment by pairing up the late Umaru Yar'Adua with Goodluck Jonathan as president and vice-president respectively, and thus paved the way for a minority Ijaw man to eventually be elected president in 2011.

Obi is Igbo. His people are their own worst political enemies. In every general election season, they tell us that it is their turn, but they do nothing to show their support for a presidential candidate of Igbo extraction. They choose each time to throw their lot with a presidential candidate from another tribe. They were the first to

write off Obi as a joke and dismissed his presidential ambition as a huge joke.

In endorsing Obi and throwing his considerable weight behind him Obasanjo, far from being mischievous, has demonstrated once more that a) the nation needs to break out of its circle of endlessly recycling the same group of men who circle in and out of one party with two different names and b) he has challenged Ndigbo to do better than grumble about marginalisation. It is their chance to rally round their own and prove that they are less politically foolish than the rest of us tend to believe.

Obi may not win the election, but his candidature could represent and pave the way for the emergence of a third viable political force in the country. It could be a force of younger men and women tired of their jaded elders mouthing the same semi-inanities about our unity and development and making the country march fast on the same spot; it could be a force of men and women who may offer the country a different kind of leadership – competent, focused, nationalistic and progressive; it could be a force for deepening our democracy and accelerate our political development; it could be a force that draws the line in the sand and right the wrong of a badly flawed leadership recruitment process and cure the country of its affliction with false steps.

This emergent force will thus represent radical changes in a nation whose leaders tend to mistake motion for movement. If only that, Peter Obi will have carved a niche for himself in our leadership recruitment process. Obidient should be the political battle cry by our young people for their place in our political sun.

I have been a critic of Obasanjo's tendency to beat his chest, making himself the authentic reference point in a nation that keeps lurching from side to side like an Agila man inebriated by undiluted palm wine. But none of us can take away from him the fact that he is, as Vice-Admiral Murtala Nyako was said, the most accomplished Nigerian so far. I have since moderated my view because I

can now see that there is a calculated method to his disruptive criticisms of the leadership offered by those who came after him and who by their actions, inactions, incompetence, or difference seem to accept that a nation that lurches from side to side is a nation on the cusp of economic, social, and political development.

You may not like Obasanjo's method but were he to speak and act like everybody else, he would not stand out and, I guess, he would cease to be who he is. No one can question his patriotism and his expressed dreams for a greater country for which he has worked without ceasing. He carries the nation's burden on his conscience. Twice he worked hard to rebuild it from the ashes of its past failures. As military head of state, he successfully prosecuted the transition to civil rule programme of the Murtala/Obasanjo military administration and returned the country to democratic rule on October 1, 1979. He did not think things would go wrong so soon and the military would return. But the generals claimed that things went wrong, and the military returned to power.

When the June 12, 1993, presidential election was annulled, the country found itself splashing in the polluted political waters of tension, grief and uncertainty. It fell on Obasanjo to return to power as a civilian president to pull it back from the brink; steady the ship of state on the choppy waters of its needless crises so the country could begin the delicate and necessary process of rebuilding and deepening its democracy in line with the global best practices in this form of government.

It should be painful for him to see that despite his efforts to remake Nigeria, the country is always driven by parochial and little minded leadership to return to its own vomit. My guess is that he believes that the men who have been there and done it, have done their best and that should be enough. We may not get an Obama or a Macron but human societies do not progress by sticking to what is rather than reaching for what should be.