

## **The death of President Yar'Adua and the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan**

### **A political and cultural analysis of Nigeria by Leke Adebayo**

*"It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place which you have dishonoured by your contempt for all virtue and defiled by your practice of every vice. You are a fractious crew and enemies to all good government. You are a pack of mercenary wretches and would, like Esau, sell your country for crumbs and like Judas, betray your God for a fistful of dollars. Is there a single virtue now remaining among you? Is there one vice you do not possess? Is there a man among you that has the least care for the good of the nation? You have grown intolerably odious to the whole nation. You that were deputed here by the people to get grievances redressed have yourselves become the greatest grievance. Your country therefore calls upon me to cleanse this unclean stable, by putting a final period to your iniquitous proceedings in this House and which by God's help and the strength he has given me, I have now come to do. I command you, therefore, if you value your lives, depart immediately from this place. Get out. Make haste. Take all your shiny shiny stuff with you. In the name of God, go!"*

***Colonel Gnabio Amaguna, in a speech to the Guinean parliament just before his coup d'état in 1979.***

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If you have never heard of this man, there's no need to worry. I hadn't heard of him too until a day ago. That's because he doesn't exist. I made the name up. These are actually the paraphrased words of Oliver Cromwell in 1653 to the English Rump Parliament just before he dismissed them<sup>1</sup>.

So, the words stem from a bygone era in a vastly different geographical location and bear no relation at all to the current circumstances in Nigeria. The days of military coups and insurrection are over. Consequently, the political class is free to do whatever it so pleases without fear of contradiction or confrontation.

Or so goes the theory and conventional wisdom.

However, here is what we actually know.

Nigeria won its independence in 1960 – it's fast approaching its 50th anniversary in October – and for 29 of those 50 years, it's been ruled by the military. Out of the 21 years of civilian rule, for 8 of them (1999-2007), Nigeria was governed by Olusegun Obasanjo (a former military ruler) who then hand-picked Umaru Yar'Adua to run as the presidential candidate for the ruling PDP party in the 2007 election which he won.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Cromwell's 'In the name of God, go' speech dismissing the Rump Parliament on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1653 – Speeches that changed the world [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=2Mj2t3Yf-zgC&pg=PA30&lpg=PA30&dq=in+the+name+of+god+go+cromwell&source=bl&ots=k9bkdGchg6&sig=rzqzF4dpP54kd7G3lvGPjhWoER8&hl=en&ei=oBbzS-CRL5Hy0gS4lfSWDQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CDwQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=in%20the%20name%20of%20god%20go%20cromwell&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=2Mj2t3Yf-zgC&pg=PA30&lpg=PA30&dq=in+the+name+of+god+go+cromwell&source=bl&ots=k9bkdGchg6&sig=rzqzF4dpP54kd7G3lvGPjhWoER8&hl=en&ei=oBbzS-CRL5Hy0gS4lfSWDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CDwQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=in%20the%20name%20of%20god%20go%20cromwell&f=false)

President Yar'Adua then ruled Nigeria from 2007 until his untimely death on May 5th.

Despite his short Presidency, what was his legacy?

According to his supporters and some neutral observers, he was a good, kindly and ascetic man who openly declared his assets on entering office. He was an individual concerned with continuing what he saw as the successes of the previous administration and reversing its errors. So, as stated by *Sola Tayo (an associate African fellow at Chatham House, the International think-tank)*<sup>2</sup>:

- he pledged to continue the economic and social reforms started by Obasanjo;
- he appointed the visionary Lamido Sanusi and the experienced Shamsuddeen Usman as Governor of the Central Bank and Finance Minister respectively and the former's programme of reforms has helped to clean up and energise Nigeria's thriving banking sector;
- he aimed to bring about peace in the Niger Delta region and was successful in instituting a form of amnesty for militants in the area;
- he reversed some of the Obasanjo (non-value for money) policies which gave certain Asian companies priority for oil deals in return for infrastructure for development projects and similarly reversed other sales of the nation's most prized assets that provided no intrinsic benefit to the nation as a whole.

To his detractors, however, he will be, forever, known as 'Baba Go-Slow' – a reference to Nigeria's infamous traffic problems – a man too plagued with ill-health to lead a nation of such magnitude and variety whilst saddled with a myriad of pressing problems.

They, like *Okey Ndibe of Sahara Reporters*, point to Nigeria (under Yar'Adua's watch)<sup>3</sup>:

- doing very little about education despite him being the first elected President with a university degree;
- doing virtually nothing to improve the country's chronic health system and seeing no contradiction or embarrassment in being flown abroad at regular intervals for his own treatment.

To his harshest and most strident critics, however, his legacy will be overshadowed by his final six months in office. A recent *Business Day* column by *Okey C. Iheduru* talked about<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Sola Tayo – AllAfrica.com 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010 <http://allafrica.com/stories/201005101044.html> and Sola Tayo at Chatham House [http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/9708\\_bn0907nigeria.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/9708_bn0907nigeria.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Okey Ndibe – Yar'Adua's Death and Debt to History May 10<sup>th</sup> 2010 - <http://www.saharareporters.com/okey-ndibe/6050-yaraduas-death-and-debt-to-history.html>

<sup>4</sup> Okey C. Iheduru in Business Day 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010 - [http://www.businessdayonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10995:presidential-death-and-nation-building&catid=96:columnists&Itemid=350](http://www.businessdayonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10995:presidential-death-and-nation-building&catid=96:columnists&Itemid=350)

*“the criminal gang around the President that turned our nation into ‘personal rule’ comparable to the wickedness of the Abacha dictatorship notorious for its palace intrigues, lies and hijacking of state power by a dangerous, thieving cabal unperturbed by what happens to 150 million people.”*

Even the **Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka** (in his farewell tribute to Yar’Adua) talks about<sup>5</sup> “vampires” around the late President who “turned him into a mere inert resource for their diabolical schemes.”

Now that he is President, what does the future hold for Goodluck Jonathan?

He seems to have the goodwill of a relieved nation and international community. He has moved remarkably deftly to establish his own authority. He reshuffled the Cabinet with an unexpected ruthlessness, he appointed his own Vice President Namadi Sambo, sacked the previous head of the electoral commission, Maurice Iwu and has pledged to reform the system.

The 64 million dollar question is: will he run for President in his own right in 2011?

His party (the PDP) has an informal zoning arrangement whereby its leadership and thus, the Presidency is carved out between the mainly Christian South (from where Jonathan hails) and the predominantly Muslim North of the country for two terms each. Obasanjo - from the South - did 2 terms (8 years) so the understanding was that the North would hold the leadership for 8 years also – subject to winning re-election. Yar’Adua’s death (in his first term) complicates matters and Northern voices feel they will be cheated if a Northerner is not at the top of the ticket in 2011.

It’s certainly a tricky decision. Does he go according to the national constitution or does he waive that to satisfy informal party demands and realpolitik? As **Thompson Ayodele, (a member of the Initiative for Public Policy Analysis, a Nigerian think-tank)** has remarked<sup>6</sup>: “there are no rules in politics – just convenient arrangements,” and the machinations leading up to the PDP primaries later on in the year (and beyond) should provide fascinating and intriguing spectacle with powerful vested interests lodged in each camp.

Will Mr Jonathan go down in history as the Gerald Ford of Nigerian politics – an accidental President who took over at a time of great national crisis but failed to be elected in his own right? Or will he, instead, be a Lyndon Johnson-type who assumed the Presidency on the untimely death of his predecessor but yet brought in great institutional changes? Only time will tell.

Let’s, however, turn our attentions back to the Doomsday scenario at the start of this piece.

The fact remains that whilst the political class is “fiddling”, Rome is still “burning”. Whilst they negotiate and have one-way conversations amongst themselves about who

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<sup>5</sup> Punch newspaper online 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010 -

<http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art2010050639054>

<sup>6</sup> The Economist May 13<sup>th</sup> 2010 - [http://www.economist.com/world/middle-east/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=16117116](http://www.economist.com/world/middle-east/displaystory.cfm?story_id=16117116)

should win the spoils of power, a vacuum is created in the land for opportunistic agitators. The populace is still being ignored and continues to suffer what Elie Wiesel (the Nobel Peace prize writer) called – albeit, in a different context - “*the perils of indifference*”<sup>7</sup> here manifested by:

- poverty;
- lack of education;
- lack of employment;
- lack of proper healthcare;
- lack of clean water and decent sanitation;
- rising crime;
- corruption;
- fuel shortages and strikes;
- low life expectancy and high rates of both child and maternal mortality.

And, why is this so?

In my opinion, the Nigerian political class (with notable exceptions like Governor Fashola of Lagos State) has not yet reached a “political-will-settlement” amongst its fellow members to act for the greater good of the nation and they have rescinded (if there was ever one in the first place) the social contract that should bind their class to and with the people.

Say whatever you want about the ‘PIIGS’ set of countries: Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain currently going through great economic turmoil but nobody doubts that their political class has at least a modicum of thought for the national interest and it could be legitimately argued that the stringent measures now being put in place by these countries reflect that.

Yes, the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) still have their own difficult, internal issues to confront but what characterises all of them is the vision of their political elite to set their countries onto a path of economic and cultural liberation – a liberation that is currently being executed before our very eyes.

In any nation that regards itself as decent and civilised, there are specific chains which hold society together. They normally comprise of having: similar values, beliefs, aspirations and goals, rights and wrongs, respecting liberty and free speech, property rights and the rule of law - all such concepts being guarded and shepherded by custodians in the political class who are then accountable and transparent to the people.

Only the most blinkered and tribal, Nigerian nationalist - if you will pardon the oxymoron - can believe such a situation currently exists in the country.

So, Nigeria is at a crossroads in its history. Take the right path and that should lead, if not to the Promised Land then, certainly, to a land that has promise. Take the wrong route and the fears of some may well be realised: fears of a vast nation comprising

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<sup>7</sup> Elie Wiesel ‘The Perils of Indifference’ Speech at the White House 12 April 1999 - <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/wiesel-transcript.htm>

150 million people sitting under a giant, ticking time-bomb that needs only the smallest of ignitions to be devastatingly activated.

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