

<http://www.tribune.com.ng/09042009/opinion.html>

Obasanjo's albatross

By Stephen Ogbonmwan

There are two sides to a coin. There are those who believe Obasanjo has done a lot for our nation and God seems to have used him to keep Nigeria together at two critical points in the nation's history. The other side of the coin are those who hate him with a passion and will not touch him with a bin pole and can do him harm if they ever have the opportunity as in the violent protest in London

Obasanjo reluctantly became the Head of State of Nigeria after the attempted coup that eliminated General Murtala Mohammed. He introduced low profile, worked on reconciliation, restructured the civil service and introduced the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN). After a year of OFN, Nigeria became self sufficient in food production as he led the campaign by making a viable farm at Dodan Barracks, the Head of State Villa as it was called then. University students, civil servants, men and women of all walks of life imbibed the concept of "if you feed yourself, you feed the nation". He introduced a Nigerian Constitution drawn up by the Constituent Assembly of Nigerian ethnic nationalities.

General Olusegun Obasanjo promised he would hand over power to an elected civilian government at a specific time and he kept his words. He organised an election which was fair by Nigerian standard and a winner was sworn in as the head of state. That singular act catapulted Obasanjo to an international statesman. No one can change that event today as it has been recorded in history books.

At that time in African history, we had despots like Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo, Omar Bongo of Gabon, Ahmadu Adhijo of Cameroon, Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo. One of these leaders is still there till today as the leader of his country.

General Obasanjo was elected a member of the Eminent Persons Group that took the fight to apartheid South Africa drawing attention to the ills of apartheid in that country which finally resulted in the release of Nelson Mandela and a free South Africa.

Nigeria at that time was basking in international sunshine courtesy of the leadership of Olusegun Obasanjo and we saw the Nigerian economy growing tremendously. He handed over to an elected civilian government a very healthy purse in external reserve due to his prudence in statecraft and economic management; funds that the NPN government of Shehu Shagari blew in four years and went borrowing in addition.

The Buhari Idiagbon regime came with their iron grip on the nation. They stressed the need for discipline and tried to pay off Nigeria's external debt incurred during the Shehu Shagari regime. That government did not last because our people like the easy life without any sacrifice for nation building.

IBB came in. He was highly diplomatic but didn't achieve much for the common Nigerian on the street with his Structural Adjustment Programme. He borrowed money recklessly from the World Bank in spite of the outcome of the national debate initiated by him that Nigeria should no longer borrow from IMF or the World Bank as we were too much in debt. At that time, we had a windfall in oil sales increasing our oil earning extensively but IBB continued to borrow without consideration for the generation of Nigerians yet unborn. Above all, he annulled the fairest and freest election in the history of the Nigerian nation for no just and obvious cause other than maybe his personal desire to perpetuate himself in office. He and his caretaker interim civilian president, Ernest Shonekan were also removed by his hatchet man General Sani Abacha in a palace bloodless coup.

Then it was the turn of the goggle wearing General Sani Abacha, his reign took Nigeria to the mud, and Nigeria was made a pariah nation and suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations after the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni 9. Many active Nigerian intellectuals bode fare well to the shores of the nation. He did not borrow neither did he honour our national debts repayment and other international agreements as a nation.

General Obasajo saw these and spoke where his contemporaries kept mute and Abacha incarcerated both him (Obasanjo) and Yar'Adua for framed up coup plotting. To the glory of God, he survived that incarceration. I do not wish to go into the details of Abacha's sudden death, the short period of governance of General Abdulsalami Abubakar; suffice it to say that he quickly organised an election and the Presidency was handed over to General Obasanjo as a way of appeasing the Yoruba whose Moshood Abiola won the June 12 presidential election. Nigeria was at the brink of disintegration with a pirate radio station funded by international groups under the aegis of NADECO blaring the need for separation to the nation.

General Obasanjo took Nigeria from the mud, washed and polished her and gave us a pride of place among the committee of nations. I was proud to be a Nigerian when I saw my leader sitting side by side and eating on the same table with former American President, George W. Bush and other world leaders during the 2005 UN General Assembly Meeting for world heads of states.

To the glory of God, there was another oil wind fall and he, again, accumulated a large external reserve for our nation. Using skilled bankers like Dr Ngozi Okonjo- Iweala, Nigeria secured debt relief from both the Paris and London Clubs. That was no mean feat. It was Obasanjo's foresightedness to identify a technocrat like Okonjo-Iweala and bring her into his administration. It takes guts and vision to do that and give that individual technocrat a special salary as recognition of the individual's worth for which a lot of Nigerians dissented. Today, we can look back and say it was worth it considering the economic gains.

He started a lot of projects, especially in the area of farming, he boosted power supply, funded water projects in many parts of the nation, fought corruption by the establishment of two viable anti-graft agencies: the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC).

Many advance-fee fraud kingpins were detained, two judges were sacked and two others suspended, Several legislators including a former senate president lost their posts and were prosecuted, three ministers were dismissed and three former state governors were impeached. An Inspector General of Police, the highest ranking police officer in the country was arrested for corrupt charges, tried and jailed; thanks to General Obasanjo who gave us a sense of direction and was fearless enough to fight corruption in very high places. These activities earned him a lot of enemies .

The evil forces fought back as expected because they wanted to maintain the status quo. And I recall writing a piece in one of the Nigerian newspapers that Obsanjo needed prayers. My observation was that his anti corruption campaign had stirred a lot of hornets' nest and that they will fight back and they did. Obasanjo lost his lovely wife, a daughter of Edo State, his son disowned him and published all manners of defamatory allegations against his person including incest which is yet to be confirmed. You will agree that the fight sometimes is not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities which the corrupt machinery in Nigeria represents.

It pained some of us to see politically motivated demonstrations under the aegis of Nigerian

students in the United Kingdom demonstrating against the person of Obasanjo. The recent revelation of the much talked about power probe has shown that the committee was biased .

For those who dislike Obasanjo and are blind to his contributions to nation building, they should remove the scales from their sight and see. They should try to hate him less if they cannot admire him because he has done a lot for the nation. He laid the foundation of many institutions that can make Nigeria great if they are well nurtured. We need a leader that can actually take off from where Obasanjo stopped. At the moment, you will agree that our nation is at a standstill.