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Prof. OMORUYI'S "RAMPARTS": HOW DEFENSIBLE?

Thanks to the author himself (and doubtless also, thanks to the laptop computer donated to him by the Edo community of Boston a few years ago), many far-flung readers have already received the transcription of Prof. Omo Omoruyi's remarks in Benin City on 26 February 2005. On that day he addressed Edo State delegates chosen by Governor Igbinedion to attend the so-called dialogue, officially known as the National Political Reform Conference, which has now commenced in Abuja.

Having interacted with Prof. in the context of his recent exile, I appreciate his powerful combination of political assets: vast practical experience plus sharp analytical ability. Anyone who would deny him these qualities does not know much about him or his work. I would also add a third characteristic: deeply rooted resentment of injustice, for example of the judicial murder of Prof.'s Ibadan classmate, Kenule Saro-Wiwa some nine years ago, and above all of the tragic fate of President-Elect Moshood Abiola, who expired and "became an orisha" (as the Yoruba might put it) while held in the Abacha-Abubakar "gulag" (as Prof has rightly called it in several essays). The fact that Bill Clinton maintained diplomatic relations with Nigeria after Ken was martyred, not to mention the fact that Basorun breathed his last in the presence of high officials of the Clinton State Department, make both events especially painful to many U.S. citizens (including me). Therefore in September 1998, I felt privileged to join Prof. at the podium of the Walter Rodney Seminar at our shared workplace, to speak on the topic of "Abiola's death in detention and the future of Nigeria".

All to say that I respect this veteran political scientist, who places exactly equal emphasis on the two parts of that title: politics and science. My brief membership in Omoruyi's informal overseas seminar attuned me to the fact that his thinking cannot be reduced to slogans, soundbites or simplifications. But one unhelpful reduction did occur in yesterday's Vanguard, which titled its report of his remarks: ["Confab: Omoruyi defends Obasanjo's 'no go areas' "](#).

There is much more to the full text, which Prof. circulated via email the same day, than a reader of the Vanguard might guess, and it is my present purpose to note some areas of "nuance" (one of George Bush's least favorite words) which did not make it into the Vanguard headline or its brief article. These inflections of his voice, being somewhat familiar to me, deserve more attention than they received. (The Guardian's report on the same event did not even try to summarise Prof.'s contribution; maybe that was wiser.)

Contra the impression given by the newspaper, I interpret Prof.'s remarks as strongly belittling the whole PDP-dominated exercise. This may surprise those who were themselves surprised when Prof. obtained a PDP membership card, as Vanguard itself reported on 18 July 2004. But I find it hard to see his participation in the sendoff of the Edo delegation as an endorsement of the process, given the tenor of his remarks, which at most give the dialogue tepid approval, damning it with the faintest possible praise. Consider the following excerpts from the paper read that day:

Referring to the Sovereign National Conferences held in Benin Republic, Niger and other countries, Prof. says that "Nigeria missed... two opportunities in her history when a National Conference of the Francophone type would have been used to resolve a political crisis... First was after the annulment [of June 12, 1993] and the second was after the death of General Sani Abacha. On these two occasions the nature of the Nigerian State or what I choose to call the British Design in this part of Africa was called into question." After the heading "Sovereign National Conference: for political crisis and not for crisis in governance" he continues, "The president [Obasanjo] is right when he told the conference [in Abuja on 21 February 2005] that a Sovereign National Conference only occurred in states that were collapsing unlike in Nigeria when the state was intact."

These statements, both the technical quibble between politics and governance (which is unfortunately not explained for us laymen, anywhere in the speech) and the assertion that the Nigerian state is currently "intact", to my mind constitute transparent begging of the question, and verge on intentional self-parody. Who calls the Nigerian state intact, after the Chris Uba coup in Anambra, the obliteration of Odi, Zaki Biam and Obioma, the impunity of crude oil "bunkering" (a fancy word for looting, according to Dr. K.M. Braide of the Niger Delta Congress), or the electoral rigging in April 2003 (Florida 2000 and Ohio 2004 were much more subtle). How many militias or vigilantes does a country need before it qualifies as a "collapsing" state? Since all these are well known, I can only understand Prof.'s words as a not-so subtle reminder to Governor Igbinedion's handpicked messengers that Nigeria missed several opportunities to repair itself via a sovereign national conference, such as is still advocated by Chief Gani Fawehinmi and others. By implication, therefore, Prof. is telling his Edo people that the PDP-inspired dialogue should not be taken too seriously.

Confirmation of the above follows directly in the text, under the heading "Your mandate" where Prof. uses the frankest language within the bounds of politeness to the Edo appointees: "Without trying to denigrate your exalted position, you cannot claim to have a mandate from any location in the State. Nigerians woke up one morning to read of names of persons in the newspapers that were nominated to represent them in the Conference." He goes on to pepper them with these rhetorical questions: "On what basis was your nomination made one may ask? Maybe the President and the Governors took certain interests into account before making the nomination. Have you been able to individually ask the President or the Governor why you were nominated and what interests you are to guard and guide? Are the Presidential nominees expected to guard and guide the President's interest? Are the Governor's nominees expected to guard and guide the interests of the Governor?" And so forth. A degree of cynicism is apparent, and the former Director-General of the Center for Democratic Studies glaringly makes no attempt to describe the National Political Reform Conference as democratic. The extra-low setting of the bar of "success" is also revealed when Prof. states further on, "No one expects that something fundamental would be undertaken within three months by the kind of assembly that was hurriedly put together under some suspicious circumstances." Hardly an endorsement.

But, while Prof. may be pessimistic about the dialogue, it is also true that he does not join its opponents. One reason for his stance is revealed in his extended critique of Chief Anthony Enahoro's constitutional views. After reminding his audience that Enahoro was a "major actor... in the pre-independence conferences... under the auspices of the British Colonial Administration," Prof. recalls how he himself once "lambasted" Chief Enahoro for resisting the presidential system of government chosen by the Obasanjo-run Constituent Assembly in 1977/78. Enahoro still prefers a parliamentary system, but Prof. says "I am glad that President Obasanjo decided to make this one of the 'no go areas'... This is no different from what President Babangida did in 1987 when he told the Constituent Assembly that this was a 'settled issue' that only needed fine-tuning." Earlier Prof. acknowledges that General Obasanjo does not actually use the term "no-go areas" but states that it's not different from the concept of non-negotiable political "ramparts"--an expression apparently borrowed from U.S. military jargon, and one which Prof. places in the title of this speech.

The relevance of the president versus parliament debate to the jamboree versus SNC debate is made plain in the next paragraph. Of course a mere dialogue can't abolish the presidency; only the SNC could do that, and Prof. earlier described such an act as a "civilian coup". Prof. explains that he himself prefers a presidency because "a return to the Parliamentary System... is anti-minorities in general and anti-Edo in particular." He adds, "All the Bendel Delegates to the foundation-laying Constituent Assembly in 1977/78 [decided] for the Presidential system because they knew that it is good for the minorities." Prof. further endorses "federal character" (another one of Obasanjo's eight ramparts) as an "attempt... to reduce the 'political salience' of ethnicity and religion in political life." Readers of Prof's book "Beyond the Tripod", chronicling the NPP "Fourth Dimension" movement in 1977-79, would grasp the deeper meaning of these words even if he did not go on to praise the outcome of the "military inspired" constituent assemblies as having given "the minority ethnic nationalities... their 'political homes' " and as having made them "key players in the federal and presidential politics since then."

So, according to Prof., parliamentarism is wrong and ramparts are right, because the so-called minorities (Edo, Izon/Ijaw, Middle Belt etc.) are politically more powerful (if this is the meaning of "better") under a presidential system than they were in a parliament. Here at last is a factual, historical question, and one should ask if it is supported by the facts. To paraphrase: is Edo more influential today than when the Mid West Region was created in 1964? Is Izon/Ijaw closer to real power today, fighting countless militia battles, than it was in 1966 when Issac Boro proclaimed the Delta People's Republic? Arguably not, in either case. What might be true is that some Edo politicians (insert names here) are closer to the center of power today, but that achievement could be dismissed as tokenism. After all, are Latinos or African-Americans better off because Alberto Gonzales is Attorney General, or because Condoleeza Rice is the Secretary of State?

When Prof. says that presidential rule is "good for the minorities", a charitable interpretation is that, given a highly-centralized "prebendal" system (to use Prof. Richard Joseph's term) for redistributing national income such as oil rents, the only way for minorities to obtain some of the so-called national cake is to have highly placed power brokers in Abuja. But this is only true if decentralized, semi-autonomous regions (a key demand of the SNC) are off the agenda; otherwise it seems self-evident that "resource control" was greater under a parliamentary regime and a less powerful central state, as described in classic Nigerian political science texts by Dudley, Nnoli and others. My point is that Prof's reasoning does not respond to advocates of a Sovereign National Congress, except perhaps implicitly to tell them to stop dreaming. But why should regional autonomy be a dream? Changing context, we can observe that ethnic minorities have strong representation in multiparty, coalition-based parliamentary systems of Europe like Spain or the U.K., whereas the allotted role of ethnic minorities in the two-party presidential system of the U.S. (a country whose senate remains a white millionaires club) is much closer to window dressing. In every U.S. national election of recent memory, the most coddled voting population has been white suburbanites, euphemistically known as "soccer moms" and "Nascar dads". So do Europeans dream more than us guys over here? Lastly, we should ask Prof. it a coincidence that, compared to a parliament, a presidential system is much closer to military rule--to the extent that General Babangida could declare himself "President", as Prof. reminds us in his book "The Tale of June 12".

In sum, Prof Omoruyi's defense of General Obasanjo's eight "ramparts", as highlighted in the Vanguard article, may be defensible on narrow, technical grounds, but only with two key assumptions which tend to trivialise the whole discussion. First, he assumes that a genuine SNC is impossible, from which it follows that a "hurried" and "suspicious" jamboree is the best possible option. Second, he asserts that "Presidentialism" (rampart number three on Obasanjo's list) works in the material interest of his Edo people and that of other minorities. The first claim may be realistic in the short run, but it is at best quite minimalist in ambition, whereas there is nothing minimal about the country's political breakdown. The second claim is factually dubious, unless the definition of minority "benefits" is restricted in advance to what is called "political pork" in the U.S. (in Nigeria it might be called "political goat meat" except that "Ghana Must Go" is already so popular).

Overall, it does not take much reading between the lines of Prof. Omoruyi's speech to see how correct he was to describe himself, in the title of his forthcoming autobiography, as a "Disillusioned Democrat."

