

# Nigeria's Obasanjo:

## Reformer with an imperious edge



Kate Stanley

Olusegun Obasanjo throws quite the party. The dining room is opulent. The hot pepper soup is scalp-searing, the food platters ridiculously plentiful. Wine is conspicuously absent — this born-again president is a teetotaler — but who needs wine? Certainly not Nigeria's top democratic dog. Even under the influence of mineral water, the man in the blue flowing gown is a load of fun.

He's no word-mincer, this new president, and no diplomat. This is a guy who says what he thinks.

In fact, he yells. He tosses his hands about. He bristles and balks and barks — taking umbrage at the slightest challenge. He waves away a waiter and bolts from the room for a point-proving document. And every so often, he stops to answer his phone — conferring with heaven-knows-whom about who-knows-what — as you acquaint yourself with your dinner plate.

Now he's chatting with his wife (Is she out of eggs?) and you can't keep your eyes off him. This is Obasanjo — the man who could be king, but isn't.

Once a mainstay of Nigeria's dictatorship, he's the country's first elected leader in 15 years. He may be high-handed, but he doesn't seem to be a crook. The same cannot be said of his late predecessor, Gen. Sani Abacha, the dictator/pilferer who tossed Obasanjo in jail on trumped-up coup charges.

After Abacha's death in 1998, Obasanjo got sprung, won an election and shepherded the military back into the barracks. In June 1999 he moved into the presidential villa in Abuja — the artificial city that graft built — and vowed to halt the official pocket-lining that is Nigeria's stock in trade.

And in a year's time, he's done a lot — propelling an anticorruption bill through the legislature, hunting down the \$5 billion still in the keeping of Abacha's heirs, seeking to quell the restive tribalism and religious bigotry threatening to tear Nigeria to bits.

People seem genuinely pleased to be free of the army's cold gaze. They speak hopefully about the possibility that the country's wealth might actually benefit its citizens. When the lights go out and the phone lines fail, they roll their eyes — and then look on the sunny side: "You think this is bad?" they say. "You have no idea

how much better things are under Obasanjo."

So this president is a good guy, you tell yourself. A reformer. Nigeria's best hope.

Then the grand man in blue hangs up the phone, and in a moment he's staring you down. "You are wrong, Madam," he bellows. "You are wrong!"

Wrong about what? About the proposition that democracy requires power-sharing — even when it comes to spending money.

The very idea seems to irk him. He plainly sees the executive branch as the heaviest part of government's tree. In Obasanjo's view, the democratic process is simple and slick: Presidents propose; legislators acquiesce.

He mocks the flock of young reformers in the new National Assembly as "boys and girls" — too inexperienced, he says, to rise to the challenge of governance. He speaks wistfully of the old times — when all it took to clean the riff-raff off the streets was a military edict.

These days, he says with a sigh, he has to fuss with separation of powers. He seems to wonder whether all that consultation is worth the trouble. "The only difference between a military government and a democracy," he declares, "is that in the military government the executive and legislative functions are merged."

Well, there's one other difference — the small matter of public consent.

But you can't expect a longtime dictator — even one laboring to be a democrat — to think of such things. A general spends a lifetime giving orders; regality becomes a reflex. So perhaps Obasanjo can be excused his imperious edge. It's certainly easier to excuse than the avarice of Senate President Chuba Okadigbo, whose colleagues impeached him last month for stealing nearly \$600,000 in public money.

Ah well, so it goes. Thievery — just like despotism — is a hard habit to break. Democracy takes practice, and Nigeria hasn't had much. It could be years before Obasanjo and Co. get the hang of government by the people, for the people.

In the meantime, the people — bone-poor in an oil-rich land — will do what they've always done: Wait and watch. And they'll wonder, as the world wonders: Can a dictator really turn into a democrat?

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