

A state of hope

Thursday, 23 March 2006

By Okey Ndibe

After years of serving as an unflattering metaphor for anarchy and chaos, Anambra state seems set to claim a different kind of reputation. It is, I suggest, a cheery day in the state. The latest impetus for this upbeat mood came in the March 15 ruling by a Court of Appeal to the effect that Peter Obi of the All Progressive Grand Alliance, not Chris Ngige of the Peoples Democratic Party, was the winner of the 2003 gubernatorial race. In finding for Obi, the court upheld the verdict of the Garba Nabaruma-led election tribunal. The appellate court's ruling provided closure to the fiercest legal joust in the state's electoral history. It was a case of justice (belatedly) done.

If the postmortem of the heated legal feud that culminated in Obi's triumph has been marked by a temperate tone, one that celebrates the victor while lauding the good works of the deposed usurper, it is because the case exemplified the slippery character of political contestations in a terrain as complex as Nigeria. Ngige was hoisted in office by a ruling party that approached the 2003 polls as if it were a shooting war. Intoxicated with the powers of incumbency, the PDP manipulated the police and deployed the nation's purse to the goal of hijacking any state it fancied. Anambra happened to be penciled in as one of the states to be "captured."

Anambrarians were aghast when the Independent National Electoral

Commission, spineless for all its profession of independence, declared that Ngige had won the governor's seat. It was a rape on the popular will, one executed through Chris Uba, a money-maddened young confidante of President Olusegun Obasanjo, and with the collusion of INEC officials. If anybody was in doubt that Ngige had not won in a clean fashion, the installed governor soon put an exclamation to the point when he and other "selected" officials took out newspaper advertorials to serenade Uba for facilitating their election and to pledge unalloyed loyalty to this sybaritic rustic. It was an unabashed acknowledgement of the hanky panky that secured their so-called electoral victories.

Obi might have skulked away to the cocoon of private despair, there to lick his wounds and contemplate the skullduggery of Nigerian politics. He could have done what many other victims of electoral heists did: shake his head in stunned disbelief and then announce that he was "leaving everything to God." He could have retreated, heeding the facile entreaty not to "overheat" the polity. He could yet have taken the path of other victims, quick to flee to safety the moment the purloiner of their mandate barred the fangs of power. If his entry into politics had been driven by a desire for lucre, he might even have exchanged the office legitimately bestowed on him for substantial financial settlement. Instead,

he adamantly discounted these easy solutions.

In refusing to abandon his mandate, or even to entertain offers to auction it off, Obi projected himself as a different species of Nigerian politician. Steely in his resolve, painstaking in his pursuit of justice, and tenacious in battle, he struck a note that is sorely needed in Nigeria's public space. That note, quite simply, is that fidelity to noble principles is heroic. In a public space dominated by men (and women) with the values of vultures and the ethos of snakes, Obi's stance was both a rebuke to his fellows as well as a lesson. A man ought to be prepared, when all is said and done, to stand for something other than (unearned) riches.

Obi's claim to our admiration proceeds from his stubborn avowal of the sacredness of electoral trust. So certain was he on this score that he rebuffed pleas from many quarters, including prelates and traditional rulers, to surrender his mandate. Until Nigerians arrive at the shared consensus that elections matter, and that the electoral will is not to be toyed with, the view will persist that victory belongs to the most audacious rigger. That line of reasoning has been pernicious for the nation. Not only has it gutted the moral insight of the public arena, it has also burdened Nigerians with leaders whose entire stock is cynicism, charlatanism and opportunism. It has reduced the purpose of all public service to the puny ethic of self-service and primitive accumulation.

Obi's legal effort to reclaim his mandate was labyrinthine and slumberous. It dragged on for three years, featuring hundreds of witnesses, some of them imported from abroad. His perseverance

in the face of this ordeal of a trial was a study in disciplined poise. It is said that the PDP hierarchy even attempted to seduce him with all manner of dirty deals, including promises to hasten the resolution of his case if he would cast his lot with the party. To his credit, Obi repudiated this filthy bait, once again demonstrating his moral discernment.

Ngige, the unseated governor, is seen by many, in Anambra as well as beyond, as a heroic figure of sorts. His claim primarily rests on his divorce of Uba, his erstwhile godfather, and his decision to stand up to Obasanjo's hardly disguised efforts to bring the full force of federal coercive apparati to force him into capitulation. Unwilling to hand over the state treasury to Uba's rapacity, Ngige and the state endured a withering, uncivil war waged by Aso Rock. A president who deludes himself about fighting corruption was driven to catatonic rage by Ngige's insistence that he was not at liberty to play Santa Claus with state money.

Would Ngige have suffered legal defeat and removal from office if he had pleased the president by consenting to permit parasitic elements to illegally enriching themselves? Many doubt it. At the very least, that question remains of speculative interest. At any rate, Ngige's renunciation of Uba's and the president's designs made him a dangerous man to the corrupt diverters of public funds. Clement Chinwoke Mbadinuju, his immediate predecessor, had squandered the state's resources on pay-offs to Abuja-based leeches who styled themselves "godfathers." So inept was Mbadinuju's government that all elementary and secondary school pupils in the state lost a full academic year owing to a strike by unpaid teachers. Mbadinuju was unable

to pay workers and pensioners for upwards of a dozen months.

Ngige salvaged the situation by cutting off the stupendous largesse to the band of gluttons. He invested the money he husbanded in road construction as well as in the payment of salaries and other recurrent obligations. His government's accomplishments in road construction are unmatched by any serving governor. Though undoubtedly exercising a mandate that was not his, Ngige's purposeful enterprise endeared him to many people in Anambra and outside. The presidency and elements of the ruling (and ruining) elite detested him for the same reason that the masses applauded him: his unflappable courage and his obstinate refusal to funnel public money into private pockets.

It was no surprise that the president, through his diarrheal spokesman Femi Fani-Kayode, would gloat over Ngige's ouster. As bereft as his master in a sense of shame or irony, Fani-Kayode told the press that the removal of Ngige vindicated the president's revelation last year that both the ex-governor and Chris Uba had confessed to rigging the gubernatorial elections in Anambra. Of course the president was too blinded by his hate of Ngige to recognise that his disclosure called into question his own ostensible trouncing of Odumegwu Ojukwu, APGA's presidential candidate. In a twist worthy of a conjuror of horrors, Fani-Kayode implored the new governor of Anambra state to do for his state what the president has been doing for the rest of the nation! I could picture the people of Anambra (and their well-wishers) exclaiming a collective "God forbid!"

Obi may well look back on his Olympian court battle as the easiest of his challenges. As we rhapsodise his triumph, we must remind him that he is now in the perilous, shark-infested waters of Nigerian politics, and his mettle will be tested in many ways. He must not forget that Uba, the denied godfather, is still on the prowl, greedy as ever, and armed with the financial arsenal and martial wherewithal that come from closeness to the occupant of Aso Rock. Maurice Iwu, the nation's chief electoral officer, has deflated his commission's collusion in stealing Obi's mandate to "a mistake." Iwu's shameless euphemism implies his reluctance to hold anybody responsible for his commission's collaboration in a grave crime. Nigeria we hail thee!

Obi is assuming office at a tempestuous time in Nigeria's history, indeed with the nation on the cusp of a decisive resistance of a president desperate to entrench himself in office unto death. Obi will be called upon to choose between the (presidential) forces of darkness and the larger forces determined to enthrone enlightenment and democratic values and set Nigeria on the path to its renaissance. Obi, an embodiment of hope, should bring his moral muscle and sturdy ethical spine to bear.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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