

Peter Obi's missteps

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By Okey Ndibe

Governor Peter Obi of Anambra, who occupies a special place in the gubernatorial annals of Nigeria, seems to me in danger of squandering his tremendous goodwill on an ill-advised feud with his predecessor, Chris Ngige. On March 15, the Court of Appeal declared what most Nigerians believed, namely, that Obi, not Ngige, had won the governorship election in 2003.

In mounting a tenacious legal challenge that culminated in the reclamation of his mandate, Obi acquired stupendous moral capital. His efforts endeared him to many Nigerians who wish to see a nation of citizens habituated to principled conduct. For those of us who admired his steadfastness, it did not make a difference that he unseated a governor who had become extremely popular on account, one, of his renunciation of a parasitic "godfather" bent on looting the resources of the state and, two, his impressive achievements in road construction and husbandry of state funds. Ngige was doubtless a usurper, but one who, in the eyes of many Anambrarians, came to command admiration by dint both of fiscal responsibility as well as disavowal of grubby octopi with tentacles extending to the presidency.

Obi's legal victory made him the only gubernatorial candidate in the 2003 elections to successfully pursue an appeal against the declared winner. That distinction is significant. The 2003 polls were massively rigged at all levels, with the misnamed Peoples Democratic Party carting off the prize of most shameless rigger. Why then, many wondered aloud, did Obi become the lone petitioner able to obtain judicial remediation? That the legal facts were on Obi's side seemed less than an adequate explanation.

Many suspected that the machinery of his own party sabotaged Ngige, once castigated by the president as "too stubborn." His public divorce of Chris Uba, a godfather after the president's heart, had proved costly for the ousted governor as well as for Anambrarians. Ngige survived an abduction effected by police officers carrying out "an order from above," a scandalous judgment handed down by the defrocked Stanley Nnaji of the Enugu High Court, and the withdrawal of his police detail, a move possibly calculated to expose him to violent death. For three days in November of 2004, hired hoodlums swept through Anambra in many trucks, setting fire to scores of public property. The arsonists were accompanied at each turn by gun-wielding police officers,

again under orders “from above” to ensure that maximum damage was inflicted on a state whose governor would not yield to demands to turn over the state treasury to greedy criminals.

The people of Anambra withstood the blitzkrieg without buckling. They defied a president who promotes the fortunes of a few at the price of the collective misfortune of millions. The federal government was complicit in the crimes perpetrated on the assets of Anambra. The presidency, despite its tepid affectation of innocence, was seen as the encourager of this brazen assault. The three-day rampage left in its wake damages estimated to exceed thirty billion naira. As I write, not a single person has been put to trial for that most obscene of crimes. Not one reprimand has been issued to the state police command for failing to halt a heinous spree of arson and destruction. The president has never visited the besieged state to assess the damage and to offer comforting words. Ngige was the president’s enemy, and the people of Anambra deserved the full measure of presidential ire.

If Ngige became an unlikely hero, it is precisely because he stared down a president and a party hierarchy that were firmly on the side of leeches and ranged against the state’s corporate interests. When the appellate court declared that Obi had won the 2003 governorship election, that judgment resonated with the truth. Even so, the verdict also dispirited many in Anambra who saw in it proof that the powers-that-be had finally rusticated a man who had refused

to serve the iniquitous forces that perpetuate the impoverishment of Nigerians. They wondered whether Governor Obi, tested by fire, would be able to demonstrate the kind of steeliness and spine that Ngige had shown again and again. Many were doubtful.

One way Obi might have assuaged this inchoate anxiety was to resist the temptation to give Obasanjo, Chris Uba and the PDP hierarchy any opportunity to laugh at Ngige’s expense. Sadly, the governor strikes me as misreading the mood of his people. A report in *The Sun* of April 11 contained a disturbing headline: “Obi begs Obasanjo”. The report stated that Governor Obi “begged President Olusegun Obasanjo to sheathe the sword and see the state as one of his own.” It quoted Obi as revealing that one of his first actions after his inauguration was to visit the president. The governor, the paper reported, said he “went to Mr. President and said to him, all the quarrels you have with Anambrarians, I don’t want it. We will work

with you.” The governor justified this proverbial extension of the olive branch on the grounds that he needs “an atmosphere of peace to deliver [for] the state.” In a similar vein, Obi was reported in *Thisday* of March 28 as expressing a willingness to work with Obasanjo in order to fetch federal goodies.

Obi should pause and ponder the price of the peace he seeks. He must not forget that Obasanjo did not feud with Ngige over substantive issues of policy or elevated matters of principle. Instead, the point was whether the president’s idle

minions should be permitted to raid the state's treasury at will and with impunity. Is Obi willing to attest that the president and his men have abandoned that ignoble goal? Besides, does Obi not realize that any worthwhile rapprochement must be prefaced by presidential acceptance of the federal government's responsibility for rehabilitating the public facilities wrecked by the hired destroyers of November, 2004?

Obi's sense of history ought to instruct him that the man he wants to embrace puts little store by peace. Instead, the president valorizes conquest, the bloodying of opponents, including those willing to throw up their hands in surrender. Ask Orji Uzor Kalu, Audu Ogbah and Atiku Abubakar. While Obi insouciantly extends a hand of peace, Obasanjo may be busy plotting the evisceration of Anambra through the imposition of Andy Uba as governor come 2007.

What dividends does Obi seriously expect from the consummation of peace with a man who has shown Olympian detestation for the people of Anambra? Federal largesse? Pray, what form of federal benefits have accrued to Enugu and Ebonyi, two states whose governors are unctuous worshippers of the president? Another pertinent question is: What deal is Obi willing to make to earn coziness with the president? Is he willing, for example, to undertake a systematic dismantling of Ngige's public image as a gubernatorial achiever?

One is disturbed by the acidic scorn for Ngige that has issued lately from the

mouth of Victor Umeh, the chairman of All Peoples Grand Alliance, Obi's political party. Is Umeh doing Obi's dirty job, or worse, the president's? In a first round of coordinated press attacks, Umeh employed needlessly caustic language to refute Ngige's claim that he'd left more than twelve billion naira in the state treasury. Then in a recent follow-up, Umeh accused Ngige of handing over an account that was in the red. Why is Umeh the public face of this assault? If Obi is unable to find the money his predecessor said was in state accounts, why does the governor not tell us? Why has he farmed out the job to a party operative who speaks with the venom of one charged with humiliating Ngige and disquieting Anambrarians who still justly celebrate the ex-governor's accomplishments? Obi should assure his people that his spirits are with them, not with the dream snatchers in Abuja.

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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*.

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