

Anarchy Cometh

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By Okey Ndibe

During my recent two-week visit to Nigeria, I read several disquieting features about the nation's police. Two of those features stood out as particularly disturbing. One was a report in the Sunday Punch edition of June 4, 2006. Titled "I participated in robbery to secure my future after retirement," it told the story of how a 23-year old police inspector named Johnson (last name withheld) became a doyen of robbers in Lagos.

A man whose job was to give grief to criminals, Johnson the rogue cop found comfort (and prosperity) in the company of robbers. He confessed to Punch reporters about his participation in a bank robbery. His words: "I was among a gang of armed robbers that robbed a bank. I, Henry, Kelvin, Sergeant Aminu, and two other boys carried out the robbery. We had an insider in that bank who supplied information to Henry. That man worked with the bank. He had a duplicate of the key to the bank's vault, which was used during the operation...Since I didn't enter with them, I can't really give the detail of how the operation was carried out. I also can't state the actual amount of money that was stolen. My share was N9 million, which I kept in Henry's account. I did this because, as a police officer, keeping

such a huge amount of money in your account would arouse suspicion."

On reading an account as amazing as this, one is apt to ask: What could have led this young man to this mire? Here was an officer whose duty was to enforce the law. How, then, did he persuade himself to abandon the path of law and order and to tread the dark, dishonourable track of crime? It is possible to speculate endlessly, but there can be no easy answers. Interestingly, the young man, who was born on January 25, 1983, offered an explanation. "When I came into the police force," he said, "I was made to understand that police, after retirement, hardly find anything to engage themselves in to keep them going, except you will apply for a private security job (sic). With the money, I thought I would be able to plan for my future. I actually never thought it would turn out this way."

Johnson's story strikes at the heart of the moral collapse that bedevils Nigeria. As Ayo Obe, one of the nation's most eloquent civil rights activists, put it in a recent seminar, Nigeria has a lethal combination of two cultures, impunity and immunity. In a nation where impunity is shielded from legal or moral sanction, anything is possible. In a nation where well-heeled criminals are shielded

from prosecution, the Johnsons of the world have little or no deterrence. What kind of nation has Nigeria become? What values animate the nation's social and moral space? We have, I am afraid, achieved a nation where the fetish of materialism is rampant. We have a nation where success is measured mostly, if not solely, in terms of one's hoard of currencies, and the harder the currency the greater our awe. We have a nation where noble, salutary values are subordinated to the blandishments of wealth. Men and women who should be called thieftains are instead hailed as chieftains. Plunderers are regaled with national honours and encouraged with inflated chieftaincy titles. Scam artists are empowered with oil blocks. The nation's fly-by-night parvenu are given to vulgar displays of their wealth and its accoutrements.

This, then, is the moral soil out of which the Johnsons of Nigeria germinate and sprout into life. If Tafa Balogun, the disgraced former Inspector-General of Police, was able to steal more than \$100 million in three years, should it surprise anybody that the corps of the police is infested with people like Johnson? Ask around anywhere in Nigeria and you are bound to hear a harvest of dispiriting stories about police officers straddling two worlds, constantly back and forth between the realms of law enforcement and that of criminality. Ask and Nigerians are likely to tell you that a high percentage of police officers operate with the mores of bandits and crime mobs. Nigerians are now so used to the incidents of officers shooting innocent civilians, especially motorists, who defy

demands for bribes. Police officers manning ubiquitous checkpoints have been known to brandish their guns, cock and shoot just because a bus driver refused to "drop" twenty naira. These tragedies have become so commonplace as to lose their shock value.

The subject of police checkpoints brings up the other matter that disturbed me. The June 5, 2006 edition of Newswatch magazine contained a long interview with Sunday Ehindero, Nigeria's Inspector-General of Police. Ehindero had recently ordered that all police roadblocks in the nation should be removed, but that directive had been treated with contempt by police officers. I traveled in three states and spoke with friends in several other states. Everywhere I went, I ran into police checkpoints, sometimes within two miles of one another. Yet, when the magazine's reporters asked Ehindero about this apparent flouting of his orders, the IG's retort suggested a man who had lost control over his men. "Honestly if there is anywhere you find a roadblock, do bring it to my attention," he told Newswatch. When he was assured that police-manned roadblocks were everywhere, Ehindero answered: "Then it is a surprise to me and we will take note of that. We will look into that."

I was aghast at the IG's response. Only a man just arrived from the moon would have failed to see the litter of police checkpoints on Nigerian roads. I found it impossible to take Ehindero's professions of ignorance seriously. In fact, to believe his ignorance is then to conclude that the man lacks the most basic credentials to

hold down his job. Does he not ply Nigerian roads like the rest of us? Does he not have subordinates whom he entrusts with ensuring that his instructions are complied with? Does he not have friends and relatives who could have told him that, since his instructions against police roadblocks were issued, these checkpoints, far from disappearing, have multiplied? At any rate, an IG of Police that requires reporters to educate him on what is common knowledge for other Nigerians is a supervisor who is sleeping and snoring at his post. If Ehindero is clueless about the festering presence of his police officers at roadblocks, then how are Nigerians to trust him to combat the battery of serious crimes plaguing the nation? Taken together, Johnson's confessions to crime as well as Ehindero's befuddlement are symptomatic of entrenched anarchy.

If police checkpoints were an efficacious tool for fighting crime, nobody would be in a hurry to see them go. But they have long become a veritable tool of corruption and crime perpetrated against law-abiding citizens. While armed robbers menace cities like Aba, Lagos and Benin, the police deploy themselves on roads to fleece drivers and passengers of their cash. Uncooperative drivers and commuters are delayed, sometimes for hours. A few unyielding drivers have been killed, and then quickly defamed by their murderers as armed robbers. A number of Ehindero's predecessors had also pledged to withdraw these dangerous pests from roads. Yet, these past IGs affected benign blindness as the roadblocks returned. Is this then some kind of practiced ploy? Is there after all

some truth to the widespread speculation that the monies collected at these roadblocks are wired to the topmost brass of the nation's police?

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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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