

Iwu's Death Wish

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By Okey Ndibe

Maurice Iwu, the brilliant professor who is on course to be a disastrous electoral umpire, likes to prate these days about patriotism. To hear him tell it, Iwu is so determined to make the 2007 polls an emblem of integrity, transparency and probity that he has pledged to martyr himself if that's what it takes. The Punch of Thursday, May 8, carried a telling caption: "2007: I'm ready to die—Iwu". The report opened with this statement: "The Chairman of the Independent National Electoral

Commission, Prof. Maurice Iwu, on Wednesday said he was prepared to die to ensure a free and fair election in 2007." The Punch reported that Iwu "said he would insist on a fraud-free poll despite intimidations and the threat to his life from persons opposed to having a credible election in the country."

I beg the man's pardon, but I just can't take him seriously. He cuts an unimpressive, unpersuasive figure. In fact, if anybody epitomizes a threat to the credibility of next year's general elections, that person, I suggest, is Iwu himself. His provenance as well as his record at the helm of the electoral body inspires little confidence in his steeliness and independence. As I indicated in a series of pieces following his nomination by President Olusegun Obasanjo, Iwu should never have got the job. It's sad that the National Assembly shirked its

responsibility by insouciantly affixing its imprimatur on Iwu's nomination.

The first warning signal lies in Iwu's relationship with the infamous Uba family. It is a matter of open speculation that Iwu's ascendancy was pushed by the trio of Andy, Ugochukwu and Chris Uba. Andy Uba is Obasanjo's well-known confidante and Man Friday, the dependable facilitator of the president's licit and illicit schemes. Though reticent by nature, often shying away from the spotlight, Andy is known to wield an influence within the sectors of power far in excess of his official designation. It is also known that Andy covets the governorship of Anambra come 2007.

Ugochukwu Uba is the undistinguished holder of one of the senatorial seats from Anambra state. Despite the legal triumph that upheld his election, the perception lingers in some quarters that he is something of a usurper. His emergence as a senator is as shadowy and open to question as his record in office has been, to put a mild word on it, unremarkable. If the quantity and quality of his legislative activity is to serve as a yardstick, then Senator Uba is best characterized as an absentee voice. Though representing a zone plagued by serious crises, including erosion, catastrophic federal roads as well as crushing poverty, Uba has stoutly resisted any temptation to lend his mouth to the narration of his constituents' plight.

The one time he was ever heard from (and quite loud and clear) was when he waxed with the shameless minority that attempted to subvert the will of Nigerians by endorsing a third term for the president. Otherwise, Uba has been conspicuous in his silence, one of the most solid practitioners of the art of representation through muteness.

Senator Uba's quiescence is virtuous only when juxtaposed against the loud, pathetic preening of younger sibling Chris Uba, the young man whose wealth has bought him neither temperance nor a modicum of wisdom, the unfledged rustic who has become a perfect metaphor for all that is hideous and exceptionable in the breed of political godfathers. Chris Uba's curriculum vitae as a politician includes such items as orchestrating the abduction of his estranged political godson, marshalling thugs to sweep through his home state in an orgy of destruction, and gleefully confessing to Obasanjo as well as the world that he had presided over the rigging of the 2003 elections in Anambra state.

What's my point? Simply that Iwu, a candidate championed by the Ubas, should not have been allowed to work even in a subordinate capacity in an electoral body that aspires to hold respectable elections. Had members of the national legislature not slumbered when constitutional duty required particular alertness, Iwu's nomination should have been dead on arrival last year. Nigeria would not have been encumbered by an electoral chief given to pompous flights of martyrdom. When a

man with Iwu's antecedents asserts that unnamed antagonists "want to kill me because I am saying the time has come to stop the people who have manipulated the electoral system for so long," his pathos should rouse us to derisive laughter. When he adds that "By God's grace, we will stop them in 2007" or proclaims that "There will be a free and fair election, even if that will be the last thing I will do in my life," we should open that beer and have a hearty laugh at the man's sense of theatre.

Iwu is tainted by reason of his supposed sponsors. His record in office is also far from stellar. His cooperation in Jerry Ugokwe's gambit to keep a purloined seat in the House of Representatives is an abiding smudge. Ugokwe, a chum of Obasanjo, had been declared an unelected impostor in the House of Representatives where he'd assumed a seat that belonged to Christian C. Okeke. Instead of accepting the rulings, Ugokwe sought to make a self-serving mockery of the nation's electoral laws by filing an untenable appeal in the ECOWAS court. Despite the clear folly of Ugokwe's expedition to the ECOWAS court, Iwu's INEC went to ludicrous lengths to frustrate Okeke's legitimate claims to a certificate of return as the duly elected candidate.

Iwu then set a new record of shame when his commission adopted a bizarre posture on the legal challenge mounted by Peter Obi to recover his gubernatorial mandate in Anambra. While the case proceeded at an electoral tribunal, INEC defended its determination that Chris Ngige of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party had won

the governorship pennant in 2003. Yet, the moment the tribunal pooh-poohed that position, Iwu's commission filed an appeal claiming that the 2003 polls were irremediably defective, and seeking leave to conduct a new election. Only the politically blind could have failed to recognize what was at stake in INEC's volte-face. The commission was in cahoots with the PDP to smuggle in another governor who would be more amenable to the parasitic designs of the party's viperous godfathers. It came as little surprise when the appellate court both upheld the tribunal's verdict and scolded INEC for its scandalous petition.

Iwu's messianic complex should be exposed for what it is: a dud. Far from possessing the will and muscle to shepherd Nigeria through elections with reasonable odds of passing muster, Iwu is burdened with negatives that render him unfit for his job. This is the man who came up with the bewildering idea of introducing electronic voting, this in a nation with notorious power breaches. He also advanced the curious idea that Nigerian elections would be better served if foreign monitors and authenticators were jettisoned. How does a man with such baggage find the spunk to project himself as capable of conducting paragons of elections?

In the end, we must not forget that Iwu was entrenched in office by the same coalition of forces and interests that tried to orchestrate the doomed third term. Nigerians ought to ask themselves whether these interests have any reason to promote elections that stand the test of credibility. Let us illustrate with Andy

Uba. Given his last name, his gubernatorial ambition in Anambra is a hopeless case. Yet, until the president's third term fantasy was re-made into "thud" term blues (apologies to Chuks Iloegbunam), a few pundits could state with utter confidence that Andy Uba's gubernatorial "installation" was a done deal. From most accounts, Iwu is a brilliant scientist. The National Assembly should rusticate him from INEC and send him back where he can thrive: his laboratory.

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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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