

Anambra's woes

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By Okey Ndibe

It is easy to misapprehend the gory spectacle issuing out of the commercial hub of Onitsha as a localized tragedy, another evidence of the high violence quotient in the political terrain of Anambra. Yet, several analysts have rushed to ascribe the bloody events in Onitsha over the past two weeks to a dominant anarchic principle in Anambra state. This is a grave misreading, and one capable of lulling the rest of the nation into a dangerous sense of complacency. Instead of awakening to the fact that their nation is poised on fragile foundations, many Nigerians give themselves to the insouciant notion that Onitsha, and only Onitsha, is beset by violence.

It ought to be spelt out: the outbreak of violence in Onitsha, with its high cost in human lives as well as its drastic impact on economic activities, is symptomatic of a failed nation-state. The crisis in Onitsha is a by-product of a nation that has suspended the rule of law, a polity where the idea of law and order is disdained by those who ought to exercise custodianship over the law, and a political turf whose principal stewards are there is no need for euphemism criminals.

Governor Peter Obi has been given grief for inviting the Nigerian army into the fray, and with instructions to shoot on sight. It was a grave gubernatorial mistake, one that, I suspect, will long

haunt this otherwise well-meaning, if unfledged, governor. In summoning soldiers to help restore tranquility to a beleaguered city, Obi was responding as a man trapped in the cross hairs of a shoot-out but without an arsenal of his own. Soldiers, he imagined, would equalize the field by outgunning and out-intimidating all the armed factions.

Obi, who claimed his office only in March after mounting a protracted legal effort, inherited a combustible state. His judicially removed predecessor, Chris Ngige, had for nearly three years withstood an Olympian violent campaign orchestrated by both his estranged godfather as well as President Olusegun Obasanjo to chase him from Government House, Awka. Ngige, the beneficiary of an election confessedly rigged by Chris Uba, became a marked man when he disavowed Uba's scheme to reap an unearned obscene harvest at the expense of the state's residents. In the ensuing battles, it was clear that the presidency was solidly behind Uba. This sybaritic upstart was always able to marshal the police to his treasonous purposes. One of the cases the president must answer after he leaves office next year has to do with why the police command in Anambra was conspicuously and strategically asleep over three days in November, 2004, as rented hoodlums swept across the state in many trucks and torched public property.

Thanks to a frivolous president and a so-called political godfather incapable of recognizing any boundaries, the Nigerian police became instruments of lawlessness and disorder. Officers whose constitutional duty is to safeguard lives and property were compelled, by orders from above, to abet the commission of the most egregious crimes and the protection of unrepentant, boastful criminals. The police were placed in the aberrant position of waging war against the very idea of law and order. This is one of the terrible legacies of a president who deludes himself that he has effected moral, social and economic reforms.

Nor has the Nigerian army acquitted itself more creditably. In Odi and Zaki Biam, Nigerian soldiers turned their guns and tanks against thousands of innocent Nigerian citizens. Intriguingly, the man who is constitutionally mandated as commander-in-chief of the armed forces always sought to leave the impression that the soldiers were on some freelance mission or else responded to a preemptive assault, unbidden by presidential order. At any rate, it is a matter of public record that the soldiers embraced each mission with deadly zest, mowing down women, enfeebled elderly citizens as well as children with glee. The army's sanguinary track record accounts for the deep disquiet felt by many at Obi's invitation of soldiers into Onitsha, with what amounts to a killing licence.

Crises such as the one taking place in Onitsha appear both increasingly commonplace in Nigeria as well as intractable. One reason for this, I suggest, is that our national experience has rendered it impossible to make a

distinction between, on the one hand, armed militias actuated by any number of grouses and, on the other, the police and military. Put blandly, the apparati of the Nigerian state, including the police, have become criminalized in both conduct and outlook.

The result is evident in the mushrooming of separatist groups and the strengthening of sectional sentiments in the country. And why not? Many of the public officials who persist in intoning the catechism of an indissoluble Nigeria are, on closer inspection, gluttons making a killing by stealing whatever is within sight, and much that isn't. They are, to adopt an apt metaphor, carrion feeding fat on the oil wealth of the ill-defined carcass that announces itself as a nation. I am optimistic enough to believe that the promise of Nigeria may yet be rescued from oblivion and realized, but it won't be done by dint of presidential prattle. Nigeria is not a nation just because Obasanjo says so in a speech, or an Ahmadu Ali or a Maurice Iwu.

As currently constituted, Nigeria is merely a space that falsely accuses itself of being a nation. A nation is, above all, about a set of shared values that have caught the imagination of members of a collectivity. A nation is founded on values powerful and positive enough to animate the interior lives of its citizens. Is this true of Nigeria? How many people in the Niger Delta are enamoured of the exploitative ethos of their nation? How many people from Oyo state are impressed by an arrangement that construes their political turf as a garrison to be governed according to the whims and decrees of an ill-educated, unabashed thug? How many decent Nigerians are delighted to belong to a

geo-political contraption where a confessed election-rigger is promoted to the sanctum sanctorum of the ruling party, with an oil bloc thrown in for good measure? How many of the millions of dispossessed Northerners are spoken for by their tiny elite of guzzlers now shouting themselves hoarse that it is their turn to preside over the continued despoliation of Nigeria?

The bloodying of Onitsha is the inevitable harvest of a politics founded on violence. The political forces that have contended in Anambra over the last seven years created the ostensible combatants in Onitsha. Different political camps armed groups of unemployed youths and used them to advance their political ends. You cannot put guns in the hands of hungry, deprived young men and then expect them to become candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize. Say what you may about the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, but one thing is clear. MASSOB, like other separatist passions, was borne of the demonstrable manifold inequities in Nigeria. When the police, whose record of civic responsibility is horrible, undertake to blitz through Onitsha in the name of dislodging members of MASSOB, the discerning public has every reason to be suspicious.

Politics is at the heart of the whole mess in Onitsha, a microcosm of the larger malaise in Nigeria. Peter Obi alone cannot rescue Onitsha, for he did not create the problem. Onitsha cannot be saved with palliatives, but with a mixture of short as well as long term measures calculated to restore hope to a people weaned for so long on a diet of hopelessness. For a start, Obi must rescind his shoot-at-sight order. Then he

should widen his efforts to clean up the eyesore that is Onitsha, giving its residents a sense of decent habitation. The National Assembly should take up police reforms. They should also compel the police as well as prosecutors to bring charges against Uba and other parties whose activities brought Anambra to this tragic pass. If the rule of law is not enthroned in Nigeria, and quickly, then forget the nation!

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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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