

INEC, politicians, and transparency

Wednesday, 10 January 2007

By Okey Ndibe

If there's one principle whose cultivation would have an immediate and significant effect on the tone of Nigerian politics, it is embodied in the idea of transparency. Politicians and state institutions, almost by reflex, seek secretive, covert modes of operation. How many times are citizens told that those running their affairs must do so in a shadowy way because the divulging of the processes of governance is deemed injurious to the health of the public? Insidiousness is beloved by politicians, but it is in the interest of citizens to continually trumpet openness, freeness, and transparency.

Having being gravely hurt again and again by knaves who pass themselves off as leaders, Nigerians ought to repudiate the surreptitious preferences of the men and women who excel in the abortion of national dreams, whose expertise lies in subordinating the nation's will to their greed, gorging themselves to a sheen while making the lives of their fellows brutish, nasty and short. It behooves Nigerians to champion transparency in their public affairs.

That demand should be made of Maurice Iwu's Independent Electoral Commission. INEC is expected to be an impartial umpire, but has done little to earn this image. For all its chairman's declamations of impartiality, the commission is far from inspiring public confidence in its independence. Iwu has

neither managed to project the image of a disinterested arbiter nor has he transformed INEC into an institution that can be called "independent" with a straight face.

Yet, many Nigerians already suspect that, if the foetus of their nation's fragile democracy is to survive beyond 2007, then INEC must be compelled to get it right. There seems little margin for error in this year's elections. Much as military rule has become taboo, an idea that is now almost universally contemned by Nigerians, we must face up to the dire prospects of military intervention should next year's elections be permitted to degenerate into an absurdity. Since the June 12, 1993 polls, adjudged exemplary by local and foreign observers, Nigeria has had a string of terribly conducted elections. The grave rigging that marked the 1999 general elections was dwarfed by the ruling party's electoral heists of 2003. The question now is whether, in 2007, Nigeria can afford another certified mockery misnamed general elections? My hunch is a resounding no.

Which is why we must be concerned that INEC, as now constituted and run, leaves a lot of room for pessimism. The commission's weird insistence on using an electronic voting system was a ghastly choice. In a nation now plagued by regular, uninterrupted power outage, the commission's choice would have come

across as a comedic contrivance right out of Orwell or Kafka if it were not so tragic. Except in the mind of Iwu and a few of his INEC acolytes, the electronic system was, from the outset, a guarantee of failure. It was as if the electoral body had undertaken to rig the infrastructure in order to make electoral manipulation both attractive and easy. If there was any residual doubt about the system's profound pitfalls, it was dispelled by the sheer incompetence and failure of INEC's voter registration. Most of my friends who tried to register electronically came away with bitter narratives of frustration.

Now INEC has set itself the controversial task of "screening" candidates for all elective public offices. A few opposition parties as well as members of the National Assembly have pointed out, persuasively in my view, that neither the constitution nor the electoral law empowers INEC to determine who is qualified to run and who isn't. The constitution sets forth minimum criteria for candidates seeking election to various offices while the electoral law essentially sets out the guidelines for what INEC is to do.

As I've contended in the past, Iwu, while unquestionably brilliant as a researcher and scientist, is burdened by the perception that he was nominated by the Uba trio of Chris, Ugochukwu and Emmanuel Nnamdi (Andy), President Olusegun Obasanjo's erstwhile senior special assistant on domestic matters. Iwu, some of his critics believe, was recruited as part of the president's doomed third term contraption. The conjecture was that, once the president succeeded in doctoring the constitution to permit himself a third run, Iwu's INEC would then have seen to it that the

president bagged the necessary "electoral" imprimatur.

Iwu, it is true, bristles at this suggestion. He's given to tough talk and has proclaimed himself nobody's lapdog. For his sake as well as the interest of Nigeria, one hopes he has some spine behind his words. He has also made hay out of claims that there were threats to his life by those afraid he would forestall their rigging goals. He has gone as far as declaring his readiness to die in defence of the cause of free and fair elections. Indeed, he has repeatedly pledged to choose death rather than permit some nameless foes to cart away any purloined votes.

Is there a credible threat to Iwu's life or is the man simply fascinated by the fantasy of martyrdom? Hard to say, even though one colleague of Iwu's from his days at the University of Nigeria has assured me that Iwu didn't strike him as the sort of man to wager his life on the principle of electoral integrity. Which is not, come to think of it, such a damning thing to say about Iwu or any other person. Nigerians have no right to set Iwu, or any electoral officer, to die on account of scrupulously executed elections. But Nigerians have a right to demand that Iwu anchor an election that is unencumbered by rigging. Allowing for reasonable human glitches, Iwu's charge is to run an election where voters have the confidence that their ballot counts and where candidates are reasonably assured that the results reflect the sentiment of voters. We're talking an election that passes muster, not one that can be mistaken as a selection. A ruse.

How can Iwu get there? Given that he means what he says, by embracing the ethic of transparency. Rather than

embroiling itself in the constitutionally questionable chore of second-guessing parties' list of candidates, the commission should do something far less controversial and infinitely more courageous as well as beneficial to the nation. It should furnish Nigerians with a substantial part, if not all, of the information submitted by candidates. That way, the commission would leave the task of vetting, contestation and evaluation in the public domain where it properly belongs.

By publicizing the claims made by aspirants, INEC would put Nigerians in the position of verifying, say, each candidate's educational credentials. Those candidates who have made fraudulent claims would then be exposed, not by the commission (whose job, frankly, it is not) but by a diligent, vigilant public. Such exposure would then be used to disqualify fraud-minded candidates.

A few weeks ago, TheNews magazine published an extensive expose on Emmanuel Uba, the president's ex-aide and now the ruling party's governorship candidate in Anambra. Among other explosive disclosures, the weekly's investigative report cast serious doubt on Uba's claim to possessing a first degree as well as a Master's and doctorate. In a tepid, diversionary response to the magazine's rigorous reportage, Uba's campaign alleged that the report was an attempt to calumniate him, blaming faceless opponents threatened by his political prospects. His publicists then asserted, without providing a shred of evidence, that the man indeed holds first and terminal degrees.

Uba's next move was strange. A man of legendary, though inexplicable wealth, he bought up and destroyed the magazine's print-run, effectively blacking out the devastating expose. A victim of a malicious campaign might have, first, provided proof of his curriculum vitae and, second, thrown a crippling libel case against the magazine.

INEC alone is in a position to definitively resolve lingering questions about Uba's certificates. By permitting the public to view all candidates' official dossiers, the commission would enable Nigerians to verify information. Anambra voters, for one, would be in a position to determine whether Uba is truly a victim of malicious reporters or a man adept at exaggeration and self-inflation, a sly operative given to dressing himself in borrowed finery. An innocent Uba would be entitled to profuse apology and public sympathy. But if he really embellished his meager educational experience and burnished his paltry accomplishments, then INEC would have equipped the voters to hand him a red card – before the election.

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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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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