

The garden of corruption

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By Okey Ndibe

Port Harcourt was once my favorite address of all Nigerian cities. The city's allure lay in its wide streets and historic landmarks, and the sheer ebullience of its residents. When, in 1983, I was posted there for my one-year stint as a member of the National Youth Service Corps, it was a fulfillment of my dream of enchantment. Still nostalgic about my days of frequenting the city at the slightest opportunity, I have wished to visit the city again. Unfortunately, during my recent trips to Nigeria I have simply been unable to re-acquaint myself with this city that, in my memory, is imbued with magic and a certain kinetic energy.

Imagine my shock, then, when I recently spoke with a friend who still regularly visits Port Harcourt for business reasons. His description of the city was ghastly. "My brother," he said in a rueful tone, "if you visit Port Harcourt today, you'll weep and weep and weep. Peter Odili has slowly wrecked the city."

Odili, for those who may not know, has since 1999 been the governor of Rivers State, whose capital is Port Harcourt. A medical doctor by training, he has governed this oil-rich state, by many accounts, as if it were his personal fiefdom. In a nation where disastrous leadership is often ascribed to the fact that rustics and ignoramuses dominate the public space, Odili, in the view of his critics, has proved that men with

impressive certificates are every bit as capable of ignoble performance as the least lettered. Today, Nigerians and foreigners alike are disturbed by the rise of militancy in Rivers State, nay the entire Niger Delta. What's less known is the role Odili played in using some of the militia leaders to advance the ends of his political ascendancy.

In a lot of ways, Odili has represented a curious phenomenon in the nation's contemporary politics. Long regarded by the popular imagination as perhaps one of the nation's most venal and corrupt governors, he was never scathed by the anti-corruption agencies. When Diepreye Alamiesiegha, the rusticated governor of neighboring Bayelsa, was impeached and then arraigned in court on charges of pilfering billions from his state's treasury, many people wondered (mostly privately) why Odili, a superior practitioner of the art of graft, was spared.

Those aware of the inner dynamics of Nigerian politics were not as confounded as the rest. For the initiates, the answer to the Odili poser lies in the governor's guile and wile, his, shall we say, astute sense of self-preservation that has led him to ingratiate himself with President Olusegun Obasanjo. As many Nigerians realize too well, there are two distinct species of corrupt people in the country: the thieves who are the president's

cronies, and those who are not. If you belong to the former group, that is, if you flatter the president, pay obeisance to him and call him Baba, then you are treated as if, in effect if not in fact, you were a moral hero, unblemished. If, on the other hand, you belong among those who view the president as a mere mortal, rather than a deity, or if you don't subscribe to the idea that Nigeria is coterminous with the president, or if your allegiance lies with Vice President Atiku Abubakar, then, yes, you're truly corrupt. All the awesome might of federal power would be deployed to ensure that you were disgraced, booted out of office and hauled, handcuffed, before a judge.

Peter Odili is as entrenched in the former camp as Alamesiegha was a card-carrying member of the latter group. That explains, in large part, the discrepancy in the fates of both men. One, a high-living, free-spending, stupendously wealthy governor who, for a moment, made a go for his party's presidential ticket; the other, a dispirited, sick ex-governor, a stupendously wealthy detainee so drained of energy that he's given to plunking down in court, the very image of a wasted, enervated man. It is an intriguing scenario, for many believe that there's no crime Alamesiegha is charged with that Odili has not done better, or worse, in. Look at portraits of both men. Odili wears a smile that is as ubiquitous as the hat that completes his sartorial stamp. Alamesiegha has the dour, perplexed and aggrieved expression of a man who never imagined that he would be cast down in a dungeon.

Odili's secret, thus far, was to swear fealty to the man-god that inhabits Aso Rock. It is said that, each time the National Assembly threatened to

impeach Obasanjo, this governor set himself the task of aborting the process, investing whatever it took. This solicitude drew him close to a president capable of shutting his eyes to the sins of those who, as the Abuja parlance goes, show "total loyalty." On several occasions, the president flew into Port Harcourt to raise Odili's hand and congratulate the governor on his manifold, transforming achievements. The only trouble was that, as far as the people of Rivers State were concerned, the governor's alleged achievements seemed to be, not "on ground," but in outer space. Odili's strides were visible only to the likes of Obasanjo who seems able to "see in the spirit."

Whoever Odili's godfather may be, and regardless of the governor's aptitude in manipulating reality, the ugly truth appears on the cusp of catching up to, and exposing, the Odili myth. What's emerging is a portrait of a state that Odili's incompetence and negligence have turned into a veritable garden of corruption.

Last December, on the eve of the ruling party's presidential primaries, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission delivered to the president's desk a damning report of financial hanky panky in Rivers State under Odili's watch. It is a sad, sorry picture of a governor's gluttony at its rapacious worst. Focusing on the activities of Rockson Engineering Company Limited, the report indicated that the governor appeared to have used this and other corporate fronts in siphoning a hundred billion naira. "It was further established," part of the report read, "that Rockson Engineering Company Limited transferred over \$120 million through

JM/JEM Air and one Thomas Eggar, a lawyer in the UK, to various bank accounts overseas. Over GBP 2 million and EURO 1 million were also transferred overseas in the same manner. These transfers were done between January and November 2006. It is important to note that all the naira denomination of these transfers were direct lodgments originating from Rivers state Government accounts."

It was far from the worst of it. The EFCC also "established that Mr. Arumemi-Ikhide, the business partner of the Rivers State Governor, is the owner of ARIK AIR LIMITED. He used monies received from the Rivers state Government to acquire all the assets and aircrafts (sic) of the company estimated to be worth over N25billion." The commission concluded that "it is abundantly clear that the Rivers State Governor, Dr. Peter Odili, is using Mr. Arumemi-Ikhide and his Rockson Engineering Company Ltd as a front and a crony for the systematic looting of the treasury of the Rivers state Government. The result of this relationship reveals that over N100 billion of Rivers State funds have been diverted by Governor Odili using Mr. Arumemi-Ikhide and his related companies."

In the face of these accusations, one is curious that the president's recourse to the impeachment tool has yet to be activated. Is there anything in the EFCC report that Obasanjo is yet to comprehend? Or are we once again witnessing a display of the president's hypocrisy, his refusal to acknowledge his acolytes' corruption or questionable deeds? When will it dawn on EFCC's Nuhu Ribadu, and his boss the president, that between Odili and Alamesiegha there is only a difference of degree? And

that Odili lays claim to the higher, more egregious degree of alleged corruption?

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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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