

Andy Uba's highest bid

Thursday, 15 February 2007

By Okey Ndibe

President Olusegun Obasanjo has served notice that he and his (misruling) Peoples Democratic Party regard this year's elections as a do-or-die affair. As if borrowing from Obasanjo's manual, Mr. Emmanuel Nnamdi "Andy" Uba, the PDP's improbable choice for the governorship seat in Anambra state, seems to operate on the premise that the office he seeks ought to go to the highest bidder. Plagued by serious ethical deficits and handicapped by his unsavory antecedents, his campaign has seized on one word, cash, as the ultimate rescuer.

More than twenty years ago, Arthur Nzeribe emerged on the political scene espousing a cash-based doctrine. He famously warned his opponents in the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) of his readiness to combat them naira for naira, bag of rice for bag of rice. From all indications, Uba is enamored of this school of politics. If one quality has distinguished his campaign so far it is his willingness to dazzle with an extravagant gush of cash.

It is evident that Uba's pockets sag with cash. Four years ago, he ferried close to \$200,000 in cash on a presidential jet that flew to New York. His failure to declare the cash landed him in serious legal trouble in U.S. courts. He had to pay a steep fine of \$26,000 to extricate himself from that mess. I'm informed that he makes the round of traditional rulers in Anambra, doling out cars and cash with

careless abandon. His campaign has also become, I'm told, one of the largest employers of young people in Anambra outside of the state government. Many of his political foot soldiers, by one account, are quartered in several hotels in Awka, and enjoy inexhaustible expense accounts. A couple of weeks ago, he announced that he was going to personally offer fuel subsidies to Anambra motorists. The headline in one newspaper read: "Uba subsidizes fuel prices in Anambra". Another newspaper caption, "Andy Uba Splashes N500m On Sports Fiesta", captured the spirit of the man's money-driven politics.

A man like Uba seems tailor-made for Nigerian politics marked by its cult of money, its fascination with candidates who, though devoid of vision, reek of inexplicable fortunes. Uba's talent for parlaying cash into political traction is hardly equaled in Nigeria. His zealous practice of a politics shaped by materialism is utterly objectionable. In the face of real and disturbing questions about him, he seems bent on obfuscating issues. And he's counting on his cash to do the trick. Rather than address legitimate questions about the man, his operatives excel at manipulating the media.

The more cash Uba spends in a desperate search for political affection, and the Anambra governorship, the more urgent must be our insistence that he come clean.

Who is the real Uba? It amazes that the man and his handlers can't get a handle on this most basic question. So far, his campaign has resembled a scam-in-progress. It has relied on the spending of a dizzying amount of money to burnish the man's image as well as to confound, if not confuse, the public record. In him we find a candidate who, for all his press visibility, retains a quality of strangeness in the public imagination. His critics have worked hard to document discrepancies between Uba's "myth" and a far less accomplished portrait supported by a litany of official records. His handlers, by contrast, have meticulously (and it seems deliberately) shirked the task of proffering proof that Uba is the man he claims to be.

Even if Uba were not seeking an elective office, Nigerians would still be entitled to ask how he came about his extraordinary prosperity. If his seemingly inexhaustible cash was legitimately accumulated, then Uba should step forward and account for it. Was he engaged in business activities while drawing a salary and other official perks as the president's senior special assistant on domestic matters? If his business mogul friends donated his campaign war chest, then Nigerians ought to know what favors he did for these businessmen, the exact nature of the quid pro quo. Where did Uba find the cash he took on the presidential jet? Was such a large sum reported to Nigerian banking officials as required by Central Bank guidelines?

Both Maurice Iwu's Independent National Electoral Commission and Nuhu Ribadu's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission have collaborated with the presidency in scheming to disqualify a few nemeses of the president,

most notably Vice President Atiku Abubakar. It is at once baffling and understandable that Iwu and Ribadu should remain incurious about Uba, a man dogged by substantial questions about his finances as well as credentials. Their silence bespeaks their unholy loyalty to President Obasanjo, the man who, in figurative terms, created Uba.

Clearly, Uba is beloved of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Speaking in Enugu where Uba received his formal investiture as a PDP gubernatorial flag bearer, Obasanjo waxed with melodramatic language. Turning to Uba, the president described him as the man "who wakes me up and watches me till I sleep." My calculation is that most residents of Anambra would retort to Obasanjo: "We dash you. Take the man away with you to Ota Farm. After all, you're going to need him to lull you to (an impossible) sleep with sugared stories of your greatness when the din of public disapproval will finally hit home in caustic salvos fired into your ear by the majority of Nigerians."

Indeed, the most poetically just outcome would be this: that Uba abandon his governorship fantasy and moves in with his retired, lonely master. Uba's shtick is to project himself as a diligent disciple who has benefited from a seven-year apprenticeship in what he told a reporter was the "Obasanjo School." This line of salesmanship is guaranteed to backfire. I predict that, in less than three months, even the most inveterate of Obasanjo's flatterers will join the chorus of Nigerians excoriating a president who was promiscuous with words but short on achievements. Like his mentor, Uba appears an adept practitioner of the art of self-reinvention. He says what he cannot

possibly mean, and acts in a way that is totally at odds with the image he now fervently professes.

Nothing in the public records in the United States suggests that Uba basked in wealth before Obasanjo hired him eight years ago. If it turns out that his fortune came at the cost of Nigerians' collective misfortune, then his attempt to play philanthropist won't matter. And the man's larger handicap is that he has yet to establish his bona fides. For several years, the public took him for a physiotherapist or, at any rate, a man with an earned doctorate. But when the tenacious duo of Sowore Omoyele and Ikenna Ellis-Ezenekwe dug into his record, they uncovered disturbing skeletons. None of Uba's post-secondary certificates could be verified. Far from holding a doctorate, the reporters found out that the man doesn't even hold a first degree. Not that a degree is a requirement for a man coveting the governor's seat. But a man who cloaks himself in borrowed academic garbs, and then sustains the façade of legitimacy for close to eight years, strikes me as unworthy of being elected governor. Uba seems content to hide the mask created by his propaganda machine, but even the best propaganda unravels in the end.

For many Anambrarians, Uba's political biography is his undoing. Many in Anambra hold Uba, his brother Chris, and Obasanjo responsible for the mayhem inflicted on the state since 2003 and even before. The tempestuous Chris Uba has been pilloried for orchestrating the abduction of former Governor Chris Ngige and also for organizing the hoodlums who in 2004 carried out a three-day burning spree of public property. Yet, many suspect that Chris

could not have dared if his elder brother, Nnamdi (nicknamed Andy by the president), and the presidency had not lent their muscle and weight. Therein lies Uba's peril. How does he justify a quest to govern a state his brother (and the machinery of the presidency) helped make ungovernable? What are the odds that, just by letting loose the faucet of cash, a people who widely despise his clan and the president he served would become fans? Sure, dole outs may purchase feigned adulation, but winning one an election remains a stretch.

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15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
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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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