

Truth's sweet triumph

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By Okey Ndibe

June 14 will go down in history as the day communal laughter and gaiety swept Nigeria. That day, the justices of the Supreme Court ruled that Governor Peter Obi of Anambra is entitled to remain in office till March 2010. They also ordered the gubernatorial poseur called Emmanuel Nnamdi Uba to immediately pack out of the governor's office in Awka, the state capital.

{mosgoogle}The judgment was music to the ears. A friend rang me from Kaduna. "There's as much celebration in Sokoto and Kaduna as in Awka," he said. "It's a victory for all Nigerians." Another friend called from Port Harcourt. "It's like a carnival here," he declared. Yet another friend e-mailed from Lagos. "After the fall of the elephant," he wrote, "we didn't know the son of the elephant would fall like the fallen father elephant." Ecstatic calls came my way from the UK, from the Netherlands, from Namibia, from various Nigerian cities.

No surprise. Nigerians are no fans of evil, even though they've for many years been subjected to the worst species of iniquity. The verdict beamed sunshine on a nation long enveloped by gloom. It propelled Nigerians to a well-deserved paroxysm of jollification. They erupted in a spontaneous display of revelry. A people who'd suffered untold hardship had reason to open their throats and serenade the heavens. It was a marvelous thing to behold.

I shudder to imagine the collective sense of doom and despondency that would have descended on the country had the court given a different, dispiriting ruling. Thank goodness, the eminent justices have given us a respite, a right to gloat!

A salute is due the heroes. Peter Obi deserves the greatest plaudit. His soft-spoken mien masks a steely quality that has made him an emblem of tenacity. He has demonstrated that adherence to principles trumps the recourse to expediency. Nigerian political scientists ought to commence studying the "Obi factor" in Nigerian politics. He has had his share of political missteps and miscalculations, but Obi's example stands as a sharp rebuke to those who, when cheated out of their mandates, lapse into lethargy.

Obi occupies a unique place in Nigerian politics, embodying unyielding doggedness. Where many readily sell their birthrights for a mess of porridge, he has taught the value of persistence and perseverance. He rebuffed numerous entreaties to cut a deal in exchange for his hijacked mandate. His principled stance paid off. After enduring a circuitous and often frustrating legal rigmarole, Obi was rewarded in March 2006. A federal court of appeal ordered Chris Ngige to vacate, and invited Obi to claim his usurped office.

The victory was fraught with snares. Unknown to the victor, predators based in Aso Rock begrudged him his hard-won office. They clandestinely plotted to abort his term. Late last year, their opportunity came when an overly trusting Obi consented to host then President Olusegun Obasanjo. The president proved an ungracious guest. A man famously allergic to decorum and decency, Obasanjo used the occasion to mobilize members of the state assembly to impeach Obi. Informing the illegal impeachment was the presidency's desire to begin the process of smuggling Uba through the backdoor to the governorship seat. Again, Obi refused to fold up and surrender. Unflappable in the face of adversity, he hastened to court and ultimately put his impeachers and their sponsors to shame.

His impeachment squelched, Obi served notice to the nation's electoral commission to shelve its plans to conduct governorship polls in Anambra. He pointed the commission to the unambiguous provisions of the constitution whose proper interpretation meant that his term would end at the expiry of four years from his date of inauguration. His argument was legally unassailable. Even so, an electoral commission with marching orders to effect Uba's coronation roundly ignored his entreaty. A sham ritual was staged and misnamed elections. Then the commission announced Uba as elected, allocating him votes that surpassed the state's tally of registered voters. The point was not lost: ghosts accounted for Uba's landslide. His "victory" precipitated a mournful mood in the state. If any jubilation attended his "selection," it took place exclusively among his ghost electors.

By finding for Obi, the justices purged the travesty of Uba's imposition. They have written themselves into the credit side of the judicial ledger. Their intrepid judgment represents the triumph of truth over falsehood. Their fidelity to sound judicial principles has expunged the political rascality that was about to take root in Anambra. We are witnesses to the dismantling of political terror and impunity.

Among the heroes are the great majority of Nigerians who rejected Uba's lucre and chose to stand by the truth. These heroes, many of them faceless peasants, scorned the perverse reasoning that Uba must be indulged since the all-powerful Obasanjo had anointed him. Privately and collectively, they prayed for Uba's rustication. The justices spoke with a unanimity that answered the people's prayer. Impunity, they ruled, must not stand!

There are, let's not forget, numerous villains in this drama. Obasanjo, a man who betrayed his exalted office in many unconscionable ways, tops the list. Here is a man to whom much was given, but who often chose the path of perfidy. He gave traction to the infamous idea of installing Uba as a governor. It was a patently tragic idea, driven by malice. A man with Uba's intellectual and ethical handicaps should never have entertained becoming a governor. Yet, a president filled with spite wished Uba on us.

Uba as governor was an affront, an imposition and a scandal rolled into one. An epitome of the worst of Obasanjo's Nigeria, Uba is a walking anthology of deception. A few of us tried to alert the nation to the discrepancies between the

man's carefully constructed public image and the paltriness of his credentials. For one, Uba listed himself as a Ph.D. It was a verifiably false claim. Sowore Omoyele of saharareporters.com, arguably Nigeria's most enterprising and irrepressible activist journalist, was first to punch holes in Uba's academic claims. It turned out that Uba doesn't even hold an earned first degree!

It was not all. Uba had in 2004 smuggled cash of \$170,000 on a presidential jet while traveling with Obasanjo to New York. The cash was handed to his mistress, a Ms. Loretta Mabinton. Most of the money went into buying Uba's kind of opulent gadget, a Mercedes Benz that carried a \$100,000 price tag. Mabinton put \$45,000 into buying farm equipment for the ex-president's Ota Farm.

The trajectory of sleaze was there for all to see. The scandal should have earned Uba the serious searchlight of law enforcement agents. It should have compelled the president to resign. Instead, Obasanjo concocted the fiction that Uba had made a stupendous fortune in the U.S. prior to his appointment as a special assistant on domestic matters. Most knew it was another pathetic lie. Uba was, by most accounts, a middling businessman—at best.

Many who interacted with Uba were shocked by his uninspiring personality and intellectual vacuity. In an Abuja awash with illicit cash but deficient in moral funds, he easily managed to live a lie for more than seven years. He and the president he served were of a kind; they deserved each other.

In the end, his gubernatorial dream ended up a two-week flash in the pan.

His "tenure" passed unremarkably. He dashed here and there, made grand pronouncements and extravagant promises. He was the portrait of a confounded governor. Like his master and mentor, he'd mastered the art of talking big but doing little. In one characteristic outing, he likened himself to a fast train. And then, in the same breath, he announced that he was in no hurry at all!

During his two-week stint, his inexplicable wealth was conspicuously exhibited. Using Abuja as his primary location, he flew daily into Enugu in his multi-million dollar Gulf Stream jet. He then commuted to Awka in a convoy of expensive cars, a man insensitive to the poverty of a people whose misery he would almost certainly have deepened.

How did a relatively lowly officer in the presidency acquire the cash to afford a Gulf Stream? Where did he make the money that built his multi-million naira home in Abuja? What was the source of the cash with which he literally tried to buy the governorship?

Those who ascribed Uba's "selection" to God's doing deserve our collective contempt. In defending the atrocity that enthroned Uba, Maurice Iwu earned a place in the gallery of shame. How did Iwu feel as he watched the outbreak of celebration that greeted the court's sack of Uba? Why didn't Uba's "landslide" produce a similar drama of elation?

Journalists must also search their souls. How many reporters, editors and editorial page editors resisted the temptation to nest with Uba? Why did most newspapers and magazines keep off their pages any unflattering details about

Uba's antecedents? Why did they censor legitimate questions about the man's spectacular but unexplained wealth?

Uba has said he'll bounce back. Those were the famous last words of Tafa Balogun on his way to prison. Uba also said that God never starts a project without finishing it. That line also sounds familiar. It was uttered by Obasanjo in the thick of his third term shenanigans. Shortly after, the illicit dream thudded to the ground and expired.

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
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23. My 419 Call
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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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