

Giving Corruption A Good Fight

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By Okey Ndibe

Those who wish to see corruption seriously combated in Nigeria must be buoyed by two developments from last week.

First was news that a British court had convicted Terry Waya of money laundering—and will be sentenced in August. Waya is a troubling creature, epitomizing the plague of sudden, inexplicable wealth. A loud, exceptionable braggart, Waya is, in the Nigerian lingo, loaded. Combining self-inflation and social gracelessness in equal measure, he's given to the most obscene mode of self-advertisement. A few years ago, he boasted to a Nigerian publication that he only drinks bottled water from Paris! This, from a man whose source of wealth and means of livelihood remain a mystery.

Kalu and Waya

Before that gaffe about Parisian water, Waya had used the occasion of his 40th birthday to insert himself smack in the middle of Nigerian media attention. His bash—to use another favorite Nigerian lingo—was held in London. Waya's star power was evident in the cast of guests. Most Nigerian governors put aside their administrative tasks and flew to London to attend this upstart's revelry.

Many Nigerians were scandalized. I remember wondering how this unfledged

fellow accumulated his riches. What good did he produce, what service provide? In what way did he contribute to Nigeria's Gross National Product? The only information I could squeeze out of anybody was that Waya had made a ton of money during the Sani Abacha regime. For rendering what services exactly? Nobody could tell.

Then President Olusegun Obasanjo castigated the frolicking, derelict governors, tagging them "owambe governors." But the governors were far from repentant. One of them, James Ibori of Delta State, riposted that he was capable of governing his state from any location, including the toilet. That scatological reference spurred me to write a damning column titled "Ibori's Toilet Ethics."

As is the wont of that breed with more money than sense, Waya was taken aback by the criticism. Weaned on the creed that wealth is an end that justifies everything, he simply could not grasp why anybody would question the party he conceived and threw for himself. He even confided in a reporter that Obasanjo personally apologized to him for berating the gubernatorial guests at his birthday. If the presidency contested that account, I didn't read it.

For several years, one feared that Terry Waya was going to get away with his

unexplained wealth. His mindless mockery of Nigerians racked by destitution. Left to the Nigerian government, the man might have continued to bask in his lucre, unperturbed. Thanks to British prosecutors, this would-be fob is about to get his comeuppance.

Another cheerful news came from the home front. Last week, the sometimes misguided Economic and Financial Crimes Commission began to act in accordance with its commission. The anti-corruption agency arraigned four former governors, Orji Kalu, Saminu Turaki, Joshua Dariye, and Jolly Nyame, before a federal court on charges of corruption. The commission alleges that the accused diverted billions of naira from their state treasuries into private pockets.

By going to court to press its case, the EFCC took a step to restore public confidence in its independence. It began a much-belated process of re-making itself into a legitimate tool against corrupt elements, not an outfit in the hands of a vindictive presidency.

Before now, Nuhu Ribadu, the commission's chairman, had conducted himself in a manner that called the agency's independence and impartiality to question. Appointed by Obasanjo, he'd in the past often behaved as if corruption was the preserve only of the former president's foes. Worse, he seemed drawn to drama rather than to the nitty-gritty of documenting his case and presenting it before a judge. He often came across as an actor with an eye to audience applause, not a man who recognized that the task of stemming corruption is arduous and painstaking.

Time there was when Ribadu operated as if his job description were to titillate Nigerians. Last year, for example, he chose the platform of the National Assembly to drop a bombshell. He informed legislators, and the nation, that all but two or three of the nation's governors had stolen their states blind. And like a man versed in the arts of feeding voyeuristic desire, he obliged with tiny, tantalizing tidbits.

The day after these astonishing revelations, the horde of governors rose up, enraged. Battle-ready, they enacted an orgy of self-exoneration. To a man, they denied ever fiddling with a kobo of public funds. They accused Ribadu of doing the bidding of a president bent on smearing everybody in sight, the better to hijack the moral high ground. Nor did Ribadu's theatrics endear him to the presidency. Sent into panic mode by the governors' collective ire, Obasanjo himself dismissed Ribadu's depiction of the spread and depth of corruption as a case of exaggerated grandstanding.

There's no question that part of Ribadu's missteps owed to Obasanjo's style. A man allergic to principles and driven by contingencies, he meddled in the affairs of the commission. His friends were shielded from exposure and humiliation; his adversaries were treated to malicious menace. The EFCC became a whip with which the ex-president flagellated those who stepped out of (his) line. Ribadu—let's be fair to him—had little room to assert his independence; after all, he serves at the pleasure of the president.

With Obasanjo out of Aso Rock, the style, if not the substance, of governance has changed. Finally, the EFCC and its officials may be on the cusp of a new era,

able to discharge their responsibilities without undue encumbrance from a hypocritical, ethically wounded president.

The commission has made a marvelous start by charging the four governors to court. A governorship is an exalted office and a governor must, always, respect the sanctity of the public purse. Quick-fingered public officials do incalculable harm to the social fabric. They pollute the moral atmosphere, and deepen misery. Only a tiny few citizens ever have the opportunity to be placed in a position of public trust. Those who betray that trust, who feather their own nests instead of serving the commonweal, are contemptible and represent the worst species of traitors. They deserve the harshest possible punishment.

The EFCC has taken the ball to the court that counts. It is now up to the commission to methodically establish the case against the governors. On their part, if they have been maliciously charged, the accused governors now have the opportunity, and the right forum, to demonstrate their innocence. Sentiments have little role in this legal drama. From now on, the process can, and must be, transparent.

Nigerians have a right to hope that, before their very eyes, are born-again Ribadu and EFCC. It means that the days of pandering to a president's ego and designs are, we hope, over. The days of unrelieved spectacle should also be in our past. Ribadu's duty is to prove his mettle as a true warrior against graft. To succeed at the job, he must ensure that the commission has the requisite latitude: to investigate thoroughly and prosecute vigorously with little or no interference. If

he can't secure guarantees of these conditions, then he had better elect, for the sake of his name and integrity, to abandon the job.

Nigerian leaders are enamored of speaking about moving the nation forward. Often, while voicing such propulsive sentiments, they are in the driver's seat, with the gear eased into reverse! Moving a nation forward is not a matter of merely of gossamery proclamation. It is a hard, deliberative business. It calls for the casting of an unsparing gaze on the past.

Which calls to mind the great challenge before Ribadu and the EFCC. Nigeria has been gravely unlucky in its tribe of leaders. Nigerians haven't forgotten about Ribadu's disclosure that thirty plus governors had corruptly enriched themselves. The commission must now move to book those other governors.

In the end, the investigation of former governors may well be a rehearsal for the mother of all probes: an investigation into the source of Obasanjo's apparent amazing wealth. And while he's at it, Ribadu might as well peer into the affairs of Mr. Andy Uba, the president's former aide who reportedly owns a scandalous fortune, and turned his doomed quest for the Anambra State governorship by splashing money as if it were going out of style.

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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About Okey Ndibe



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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