

Crimes In Progress

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By Okey Ndibe

Emmanuel Nnamdi (“Andy”) Uba, ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo’s domestic aide, was the instrument used to quell the whirlwind that was set to sweep away Speaker Patricia Etteh. That impression was given last week by several Nigerian newspapers. Embroiled in a scandal for approving six hundred million naira for the renovation of two official residences—hers and her deputy’s—Etteh’s odds of survival seemed slim. But then Uba stepped in and—from the look of things—bought her a reprieve.

Mr. Uba’s solution was a political masterstroke of a predictable, familiar kind. He came up with a plan that serves the narrow interests of the speaker as well as the legislators on opposite sides of the feud, but works against the interests of the Nigerian people. What was that solution?

One of the most detailed and telling accounts of it was published in the *Punch* of September 6. In order to grasp the import and nature of Uba’s scheme, we ought to quote at length from the *Punch* report written by Sola Imoru and Kemi Obasola. The report began: “A former Special Assistant to the President on Domestic Affairs, Dr. [sic] Andy Uba, on Wednesday saved the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mrs. Patricia Etteh, from humiliation.”

Right there, the report revealed where Uba’s heart lies. Forget about saving

Nigeria from humiliation, what matters is securing the comfort of Madam Speaker.

The *Punch* continued: “Investigations by one of our correspondents showed that Uba hosted a secret meeting between Etteh and the key leaders of the Integrity Group, who wanted to unseat the Speaker. The secret parley was held at Uba’s mansion at 175, Ibrahim Taiwo Road, Asokoro Quarters, Abuja.”

Let’s note in passing that Uba, who nine years ago was a struggling businessman in California, amassed enough “dividends of democracy” from Obasanjo to afford a mansion in Asokoro, perhaps Nigeria’s most expensive real estate stretch. Having noted that, we must hasten back to the *Punch*. “A source said Uba’s intervention was at the instance of the Presidency, which claimed that the scandal in the House would not augur well for the stability of the lower chamber. The source alleged that a top shot in the Presidency had put a call to Uba on Tuesday night to ‘find a way of reconciling the warring members in the House, having been instrumental to their election.’ Based on the directive of the Presidency, Uba decided to convene the secret meeting.”

That the Presidency would give Uba the job of hoodwinking Nigerians speaks volumes about Umaru Yar’adua’s alleged ethical credentials. If the Presidency were

truly concerned about the “stability of the lower chamber,” might it not have backed the removal of a speaker who has excelled in degrading the office and the chamber? If the Presidency feels that Uba should be saddled with rescuing the speaker from her ethical tangle, then what ethical capital does the current tenant at Aso Rock ascribe to Uba? The clause that Uba was “instrumental to [the] election” of the warring legislators speaks volumes about Uba’s supposed “electoral” powers. Pray, who gave him the magical mandate to cast the votes for all the legislators? Are we to decode the exaggerated praise as acknowledging Uba’s role in April’s electoral fraudfest?

The Punch continued: “Those at the session were Etteh; her deputy, Babangida Nguroje; the House leader, Chief Tunde Akogun; the Chief Whip, Bethel Amadi; and his deputy, Mr. Aminu Tambuwal. Others from the opposing camp were Mr. Farouk Lawan, Mrs. Lynda Ikpeazu, Mr. Halims Agoda, Mr. Aliyu Wadada, and Mrs. Mercy Isei. It was learnt that the emergency meeting, which began at about 10am, ended around 1.40pm.”

Basically, the dramatis personae were in Uba’s mansion for this high-powered parley whose goal was not to advance the nation’s interest but to save a single, over-indulged politician “from humiliation.” So what came of this agenda? Let’s turn to the Punch: “A source said, ‘The two parties decided to sheathe their swords and halt the impeachment of the Speaker. Those against Etteh gave her a condition to reconstitute the membership of some of the committees in the House. They also asked the Speaker to be mutually consultative on major issues, especially contracts.’”

Which is to say that, as far as the warring representatives are concerned, the cessation of hostilities is a done deal. What was the price for peace? Etteh is to give juicier committee assignments to some of her nemeses. And, when next there are hundreds of millions (perhaps billions) of naira to be squandered on renovation or other contracts, she must spread the joy around. Spreading the lucre, that’s the best way of decoding the awkward euphemism that the speaker must be “mutually consultative on major issues, especially contracts.” In fact, for the impostors gathered in Mr. Uba’s mansion, there can’t be any more major issue than contracts.

If the speaker and her erstwhile antagonists have kissed and made up, then how is the resolution to be sold to Nigerians? With Uba as guardian spirit, the issue of public manipulation posed little or no problem. For the specifics of Uba’s political heroics, we need turn again to the Punch: “But to manage the scandal, which is already in public domain, the two groups agreed that a committee should be set up to investigate the award of the N628m contracts.” Investigate? More like an exercise in mass deception, a strategy to deflect the public’s attention from an unforgivable scandal. According to the Punch, the “two camps agreed that the committee would just be a mere smokescreen in order to diffuse tension in the House and in the country.”

Just in case anybody had doubts about pulling off the jiggery pokery, the Uba conclave reached back to recent history for reassurance. The Punch reporters wrote that “The groups recalled that a

former Deputy President of the Senate, Alhaji Ibrahim Mantu, had faced a similar crisis but the report of the committee was never given any serious consideration. The leaders of the aggrieved members of the House were thereafter directed to ensure a 'soft-landing' for Etteh at the Wednesday session."

If anybody is well placed to understand the art of public deception, it's Uba. A trusted scion of Obasanjo's disastrous political theater that ran for eight long years, thriving on falsehood, Uba proved a great apprentice and imitator when he ran for the governorship of Anambra. Widely despised in Anambra for his role in the systematic destruction of the state, alongside Obasanjo and his stormy petrel of a younger brother, Uba cut a tragic figure when his handlers sold him as a mini-Obasanjo. His hubris was checked when, on June 14, the Supreme Court disabused him of the delusion of being a governor.

It is in character that Uba has emerged from hibernation to anchor a grand plot to mislead the Nigerian people. The deal he helped engineer for embattled Etteh is in keeping with his unimpressive moral outlook. In fact, his imprimatur on the Etteh rescue plan is proof, if any were ever needed, that Uba was an attentive apprentice of Obasanjo's, mastering his master's atrocious brand of ethics.

It was Obasanjo who, in the aftermath of the abduction of Chris Ngige in 2003, came up with the dictum that it was "a family affair". Five years later, Uba has implied that Etteh's squandering of the nation's scarce resources in pursuit of obscene luxury is a family affair. When these men speak of family, they must mean crime families! When hired

hoodlums owned the streets of Anambra, making a bonfire of public assets, Obasanjo claimed in an angry letter to then PDP Chairman Audu Ogebe that the perpetrators were being investigated, and would be tried. It turned out a diversion, sheer presidential deceit. Today, Uba has brokered a deal to shield the speaker of the House of Representatives from the consequences of her mindless wastage of public funds.

Nigerian students, who make do without basic facilities, workers, who toil but receive less than subsistence wages, and the vast majority of Nigerians who grind out a harsh existence below the poverty line, ought to wake up to the fact that they're being had—or screwed as Americans would say. One of Obasanjo's last acts in office was to stiff Nigerians with higher taxes and fuel prices. One of Yar'adua's first acts in his usurped office was to try to sustain Obasanjo's callous imposition. Their argument, tacit or stated, was that the country could not afford the burden of (alleged) fuel subsidies. But those who rape Nigeria and its resources have no trouble spending more than five million dollars to spruce up two official quarters!

That is the precise nature of Etteh's crime. And the effort to cover up this crime is a crime in itself. Even if the speaker followed all the prescribed procedures for awarding a contract, she is guilty of arrogance, insensitivity, and presumption. The Nigerian state throws petty thieves in jail, some of them for stealing in order to eat. Why then are those who throw obscene parties for themselves at public expense, or who acquire mansions and stupendous bank accounts by inexplicable means, allowed

to walk the streets as free men and women?

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
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