

Silly theatre in Anambra, again and Yerima's \$50,000 question

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By Okey Ndibe

Anambra State is embroiled once again in some silly theatre. This time, it's the Nnamdi Uba-appointed state assembly that has decided to hold the state hostage by toying with the budget.

Late last year, Governor Peter Obi presented a proposed budget of N84.2 billion naira to cover capital as well as recurrent expenditures. Several months later, the membership of the state assembly is far from finalizing the budget. Instead, a majority of the members have taken to playing the most sordid politics with a matter that touches directly on the lives of Anambra indigenes. In an arbitrary move informed neither by rhyme nor reason, the assembly is threatening to gut the budget by cutting it deeply. It's nothing short of shameful and unforgivable politicking.

On the face of it, this kind of budgetary disagreement is far from unusual in a democracy. Democracy thrives, after all, on fierce debates and philosophical differences over policy directions.

Let's put things in some perspective. Under the Nigerian constitution, a governor's place is to propose budgets. The same constitution empowers the state legislature to vet the proposal and then approve what it deems appropriate expenditure.

Given the above, it is easy to suppose that the state assembly is acting prudently in so slashing Mr. Obi's budgetary proposal. But the assembly is neither prudent nor constitution-minded. It is, in the deepest sense, a rogue parliament, with all thirty of its members selected by Mr. Uba.

The budgetary impasse in Anambra has little to do with democracy or the constitution. Therein lies the sordidness.

Twice, the Supreme Court has abbreviated Uba's gubernatorial fantasy. A man of more sober sensibility might have packed it in, and retreated to the drawing board to prepare, if he must, to fight another day. But not Uba. A self-avowed admirer of former President Olusegun Obasanjo's "polititricks," Uba has sought to use his legislative appointees as tools to render the state ungovernable.

Uba's brinkmanship took on a desperate note after a panel of the Federal Court of Appeal handed him a symbolic, hollow favorable judgment that he and his attorneys initially portrayed in giddy terms. For a few days, Uba and his spin-doctors trumpeted the fiction that he has been declared "governor-in-waiting." Their giddiness lasted a short time, then the reality dawned: that the idea of a "governor-in-waiting" is a freak notion, absolutely alien to the constitution.

But Uba's determination to mire Anambra in crisis has increased with every judicial defeat. He has made political capital out of manipulating the men and women he carefully selected and assigned seats in the state legislature in what remains a record-breaking scandal of elections. He has used these usurper lawmakers to ambush the people of Anambra in the name of punishing Obi, the man whose dogged pursuit of justice finally torpedoed Uba's illicit grab for the office of governor.

Uba's vendetta-driven tactics have even alienated some of the members of the state assembly. Several weeks ago, eleven of them exposed and then renounced the agenda of holding Anambra residents hostage to one man's political machinations. The agenda's singular thrust is to sabotage Obi's administration by denying him the money to pursue any significant developmental initiatives. The calculation is that Obi's failure would then make the people of Anambra so despondent they would hanker after an Uba governorship. Futile dreams are made of these!

Anambra's unfortunate budgetary drama illustrates the dangers of our godfather-mediated politics. When a people or the judiciary permits one man's money and reckless ambition to override the electorate's sovereignty, then nobody should be puzzled when that lone power broker's selfish interests dictate a tragic turn of public affairs. In Oyo, "Governor" Alao-Akala is doing a superb job as long as he keeps Lamidi Adedibu happy. In similar fashion, the Anambra legislature, peopled by Uba's appointees, discharges its "honorable" duties according to its main sponsor's decrees.

In the meantime, the state's wretched of the earth (to echo Frantz Fanon) are left to bear the brunt of one man's inordinate ambitions. While seeking to severely cut the budget, the legislators quadrupled their own budgetary allocation to more than N1.2 billion. What self-centeredness!

In the short run, the way out of the budgetary stalemate lies in the hope that several more of the assembly members would develop enough spine to reject Uba's ruinous agenda. In the long run, the election tribunals ought to expedite the disposition of pending challenges to the "election" of Uba's slate of candidates. Anambra—as much as other states as well—deserves to start enjoying the reign of political sanity. In the end, the antidote to the agents of impunity is to conduct elections in which the voices of eligible voters are felt and respected. Then, and only then, would we have lawmakers who put their constituents first in all they do.

Sani Yerima's \$50,000 question

The name Sani Ahmad Buka Yerima occupies a special place—of infamy—in the annals of Nigerian politics. A former governor of Zamfara, he made history by becoming the staunchest champion of the institution of sharia law. And to serve notice to the world that he meant business, he authorized the cutting of a man's hand for stealing.

You'd think that a man who hastened to amputate the limbs of thieves would also subject himself to a scrupulous standard of moral conduct. For one, such a man should have no whiff of corruption about his person. He should be expected to rein

in any urge to pilfer from public funds. For such a man, respect for the sanctity of the public treasury ought to be an article of faith.

It is not at all clear that Yerima lived by the stern expectations he established for desperate thieves, even famished pickpockets. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) often mentioned Mr. Yerima as a target of the agency's graft investigations. Despite the fact that he sits in the Senate in Abuja, Yerima still walks under the shadows of those serious graft allegations.

On March 30, 2008, this newspaper reported that, while serving as governor, Yerima had made a controversial financial donation to American Heritage University, a private college based in California. According to the paper, the exact amount of the former governor's largesse remained in question. In fact, the paper's headline read: "Yerima's \$1m donation tears US varsity apart".

Interviewed for the story, Yerima denied making the million-dollar donation. "It's a lie. I never gave \$1 million. What I approved and which was paid through Zamfara State Ministry of Finance was \$50,000.00." When the reporter asked why an impoverished state would send a cheque "to an American University whose budget and fortunes could be bigger than that of an economically backward State like Zamfara," the former governor exhibited his true color. "What is in \$50,000? How much is \$50,000?" he asked the reporter. Then he added: "Do not forget that it was tied to a specific need and proposal: The AHU people were to provide Open University linkage to our state university and other higher institutions in the state."

Memo to Yerima: If you don't know what \$50,000 means for any Nigerian, then you had no business being a governor. If you look at \$50,000 as what Americans call "chump change," then your senatorial seat ought to be taken away.

Sadly, many Nigerian politicians are of the Yerima breed. They have no clue about the depth of destitution in their country. They are criminally nonchalant about the misery in which the majority of Nigerians wallow. As their fellows try to eke out one meal (whether square, rectangular or circular, it doesn't matter) a day, these politicians bask in unconscionable riches, buy up swanky real estate in Europe, North America or elsewhere, spoil themselves with foreign-made luxury goods, and wire public funds into their private accounts—usually abroad.

Yerima will probably never understand what most of my readers understand—that \$50,000 equals what 50,000 almost impoverished Nigerians spend to eat in a day! In handing American University that cheque, Yerima probably took food from 100,000 to 200,000 impoverished Zamfarians! If the Zamfara legislature is alert to its duties, it should start asking questions. Was Yerima's donation the best use of public funds? What benefits have accrued to the state's higher institutions, and are those benefits commensurate with the price tag?

Yerima could sniff at \$50,000 and get away with it because he operates in a country where public leaders are hardly called to account. In many other countries, his verbal gaffe could be career-ending.

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