

Crowd renters and riggers of history

Monday, 11 August 2008

By Okey Ndibe

If those who “rule” Nigeria persist in marshalling the instruments of state to protect suspected big-time criminals, then nobody should be surprised when the edifice of governance collapses in a heap. Tragically, the Nigerian state has long been a criminal enterprise. It is run, it is now clear, by a mindless cabal whose twin goals are to amass illicit wealth and then use this ill-gotten lucre to shield themselves, and their ilk, from prosecution.

Nothing better illustrates this tragic devotion of state apparatuses to protect suspects than the case of Mr. Liyel Imoke, former governor of Cross River State, former Minister of Power, and former chairman of a technical committee on the power sector.

Since an appellate court panel removed Imoke as governor, the machinery of the Nigerian state has been mobilized to shield the ex-governor from possible prosecution for his role in squandering billions of dollars allegedly invested in the National Integrated Power Projects (NIPP).

The House of Representatives, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Aso Rock as well as Imoke himself have choreographed a dance to enable Imoke to evade what he richly deserves: political fall and legal trouble.

First, the leadership of the House of Representatives made the bizarre decision not to release and discuss the report of a legislative panel that probed the scandalous wastage of funds in the power sector. Shocking revelations had dominated the probe panel’s public hearings. Enrapt Nigerians heard about how the Obasanjo government disdained due process in the award of power sector contracts. They heard about that administration’s irresponsible bestowal of billions of naira in mobilization fees on inexperienced and often unregistered companies. They heard about companies that collected billions in payment but didn’t even bother to move a grain of sand much less execute their projects.

Witness after witness had named Obasanjo and Imoke as the major players in the shameful fleecing of Nigeria. A week and a half ago, Mr. Godwin Ndudi Elumelu, who chaired the House of Representatives’ probe panel, told Nigerians that the National Integrated Power Project (NIPP) never existed. It was, he insisted, a scam to defraud the public. If anybody should know, Mr. Elumelu is that person.

In any serious country, both Obasanjo and Imoke should long have been put in the dock. Instead, some members of the National Assembly protested when the panel asked Obasanjo to appear before it. They were more outraged about the alleged disrespect to an ex-president than

the allegations that the man criminally oversaw the siphoning of billions of dollars in public funds. On his part, Imoke waltzed into the hearing with rented cheerleaders in tow. He spent more time lecturing the panel on how much more South Africa was spending on its power needs than explaining why he authorized payment to companies that did little or no jobs.

Yet, now that Imoke has been stripped of immunity, the machinery of the Nigerian state has gone berserk in a depraved effort to protect a man whose claim to notoriety is that he played a disastrous role in the power sector throughout the life of the Obasanjo regime. His profile in government demonstrates the strangeness of political careerism in Nigeria.

First, Imoke failed in his assignment as chairman of a technical committee charged with ensuring that Nigerians had regular, uninterrupted power supply by the end of 2001. Despite this proven ineptitude, Imoke was elevated to a cabinet position where his disastrous streak continued. As a friend of mine quipped recently, he established himself as a minister of candle, lamp and standby generators. Worse, he got himself mired in the scandal of NIPP.

Those disturbed by the ghastly state of affairs in Nigeria ought to wonder how a man of such visible non-achievement could have managed to become a governor. In a country where accountability matters, he would have been permanently banished from the public arena. Unfortunately, Nigeria is a space where certified failures are allowed to "repeat." Hence Imoke's curious

emergence as governor of Cross River State.

Luckily for Nigerians, whose resources are mindlessly wasted by the contemptible bunch that parades as leaders, the power probe report has been leaked to saharareporters.com as well as a few newspapers. That website and several Nigerian newspapers have reported that the probe panel indicted Imoke and other highly placed Nigerians. It also reportedly recommends that former President Olusegun Obasanjo should be investigated for his role in the scam.

Don't expect the leadership of the House of Representatives to easily abandon its policy of maximum delay before releasing the report. Many suspect, in fact, that some of the indicted elements are working feverishly to doctor the report, turning it into a wishy-washy document.

Some in the press have suggested that the ongoing political trickery is designed to shield Imoke and others implicated in the report from political embarrassment and legal jeopardy. That speculation makes sense. Imoke has the most to lose should the damning report be officially released. That's why he and his cohorts are desperately working to re-install him as governor, since Nigeria has the shameful tradition of offering immunity even to governors who commit crimes.

Rather than do the patriotic thing by putting the report before Nigerians, Speaker Dimeji Bankole dissolved all committees of the house, and sent the members on a long break. Bankole's political pronouncements have been sounding weird lately. Here's the man

who told Nigerians that Obasanjo frittered away \$16 billion, not \$10 billion, in the power sector. Here's the man who catalyzed the probe. These days, however, Speaker Bankole has taken to speaking about the potential of probe reports to overheat the system. He forgets that, in the final reckoning, the system is most overheated when criminals are let go without prosecution.

Bankole has opened himself to suspicion of seeking to protect Imoke's political dreams. Perhaps the speaker is playing faithful party man, for it is clear that the hierarchy of the ruling PDP doesn't want Imoke's political ambitions torpedoed. But the nation's legislative process discredits itself when it's rigged to protect a political who has grave questions he must answer, and likely in a criminal court.

Imoke has continued to boast that he has no fear of the EFCC. It's an easy assertion to make when one knows that the occupant of Aso Rock and other powerful forces are restraining the EFCC from carrying out its job. At any rate, the EFCC's statement that it's investigating the ex-governor is seen for what it is: a ploy to enable Imoke to re-run, and possibly reoccupy, the governor's seat in Calabar.

A beneficiary of concerted protection by the state, Imoke has also apparently resorted to self-help. Last week, Nigerian newspapers were filled with full-page adverts extolling Imoke's alleged virtues. One of the propaganda pieces lauded his introduction of accountability and transparency in his state. Another attacked individuals and organizations that had asked the EFCC to arrest Imoke.

The orchestrated pro-Imoke ads reminded me of the temporary thrills, but ultimate peril, of any effort to rig the verdict of history. When the public record is straightforward, as it is in Imoke's case, the attempt to manipulate is bound to fail. The matter is quite simple. Nigerians know they didn't see even the slightest improvement in power supply during the years Imoke reigned as minister of power. Instead, the nation witnessed a worsening of its power situation.

At any rate, whether Imoke was an extraordinary governor is beside the point. The point is that Obasanjo, Imoke, Olusegun Agagu and others owe Nigerians an explanation about how they could have spent billions of dollars on power projects and ended up with an outcome of less power. Sooner rather than later, Imoke must explain whether the billions grew wings, and how they disappeared. Rented crowds of praise singers won't make the questions go away. Nor can a coalition of legislative leaders, EFCC, and Aso Rock wish away the day of reckoning.

Since he's close to Obasanjo, Imoke had better learn from the ex-president about the futility of trying to rig the verdict of history. Did Obasanjo, in the waning days of his presidency, not nudge the PDP to crown him father of modern Nigeria? And what's happening today? The same party that flattered his bloated ego is in a haste to shoo him off from his perch as chairman of its board of trustees. Those who today sign Imoke's manufactured version of history may soon cover their noses in disgust.

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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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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