

Hunting the Hunter

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigerians ought to pay attention to two recent, and clearly linked, events. The two events illustrate how the cabal that runs – which is to say, ruins – Nigeria goes about protecting its own and preserving its right to eat Nigerians for lunch.

First, there's the EFCC's arrest and arraignment of Ndudi Elumelu, chair of the House of Representatives committee on power. Mr. Elumelu is accused of participating in a N5.2 billion rural electrification scam. The second is the effort to discredit the work of Elumelu's probe panel.

Elumelu's trial is a politically significant development. Last year, his committee had probed Nigeria's multi-billion dollar investment in power projects that seem to have disappeared, puff, into air.

Umaru Musa Yar'Adua first alerted Nigerians to the scandal. He said his predecessor had spent \$10 billion on power with nothing to show for it. Shortly after, Speaker Dimeji Bankole asserted that as much as \$16 billion may have been wasted in the name of power projects.

Elumelu and his committee got cracking. Revelation after astounding revelation emerged at their televised hearings. In case after case, witnesses testified that contractors who had not as much as scratched a grain of sand had walked

away with as much as 80 percent of contract sums. In most, if not all, cases, the government had violated its own due process rules.

What emerged from the hearings was an unseemly picture of political office holders betraying the public trust. Judging by the hearings, the committee's report was expected to make explosive findings. It did, indicting both former President Olusegun Obasanjo and his clique of cabinet operatives, including Liyel Imoke (now a governor) and Olusegun Agagu (a rusticated governor).

Asked to appear and tell his side of the sordid affair, Obasanjo quibbled about the lowly station of the man who signed his letter of invitation. He then told the committee he was too "indisposed" to appear in person. Instead, he sent a long epistle filled with rambling lectures on etiquette and obfuscations where clear answers were needed about the huge payments he authorized for questionable or non-existent work.

Imoke appeared before the committee, but his performance was no better than his former boss's. He arrived with a cheerleading squad in tow. Then he basically told the committee that Nigerians had no right to expect improved power supply before they have pumped cash on the scale of South Africa's investment in the power sector.

Agagu? Well, he could hardly remember a thing he did as power minister.

You'd think that the Elumelu report would inform Nigerians about the way their scarce resources were squandered. From the outset, it was clear that powerful interests were out to torpedo the report. The speaker, once an enthusiast, threw so many roadblocks in the way of the report that it took months before the committee had an opportunity to tell Nigerians what they'd found. Some murmured that the committee had pocketed a huge bribe. An exasperated Elumelu abandoned parliamentary reserve to warn Nigerians that those who misappropriated funds were out to fudge up the picture.

When it came time to present his report, the occasion turned into farce. Numerous members of the committee disowned the report, accused Elumelu of running a witch-hunt, and even sang the praises of the men who'd signed off billions of dollars of public funds to contractors who did next to nothing.

In the end, the House asked another committee, headed by deputy whip Aminu Tambuwal, to take a look at Elumelu's work.

Last week, Tambuwal's committee dismissed Elumelu's report. In a verdict inflected with the misruling cabal's ability to lie with a straight face, the ad-hoc committee claimed that Nigeria "did not lose any money in the award of power projects executed by the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo between 1999 and 2007."

With Obasanjo, Imoke and Agagu thus canonized, Nigerians ought to wonder whether Elumelu's trial is a case of teaching a whistle blower a lesson.

If Elumelu played hanky panky with funds meant for rural electrification, by all means nail him. But the leadership of the House must think Nigerians brain dead if they expect us to swallow the concoction that Obasanjo's power projects were beyond reproach.

The test of the truth lies in Nigerian light switches. If the \$10 billion (or \$13 billion or \$16 billion) Obasanjo threw into power projects were well invested, then Nigerians would find a commensurate measure of improvement in their power supply. Alas, that's not the case.

The Coalition Against Corrupt Leaders (CACOL) is right to question how Tambuwal's "subterranean committee" could "discredit the report of a probe procedure that the same House carried out in the full glare of the whole world through live transmission on global television channels."

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet and political activist. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." He 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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