

Is Peter Obi a Hypocrite?

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By Okey Ndibe

Governor Peter Obi of Anambra is in serious danger of becoming a tragic political figure. According to widely circulated reports, police officers two weeks ago caught men close to the governor with a large cache of cash. As I write, there's some uncertainty about the sum, but most accounts say N250 million.

Apparently, the cash couriers were stopped as they drove to Obi's business headquarters in Apapa. Since then, Obi's office has tried to explain away the scandal. The governor's aides have, to put it bluntly, done a poor job of it.

They suggested that the cash belonged to a contractor who's done business with the state government. They have also contended that the cash was far less than newspapers reported. Then, in a needless and unconvincing attempt to muster moral bravado, Obi telegraphed a public letter to the Inspector General of Police demanding a thorough investigation.

Even at the most charitable, one must state that Obi's explanations, so far, about the source, ownership and purpose of the cash have been nothing short of inconsistent and unimpressive. If anything, the tenor of the Government House's statements suggests the scrambling incoherence of a man caught doing something indefensible.

In the ten years since Nigeria embarked on this strange phase many pundits call

"nascent democracy," no politician has garnered as much goodwill as Mr. Obi.

Many of us applauded the tenacity with which the man mounted a legal effort to retrieve the mandate the voters of Anambra gave him in 2003, but which was hijacked by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party and its candidate, Chris Ngige, a medical doctor. As an unwavering believer in the principle of credible elections, I took pride in Obi's decision not to abandon pursuit of an office he'd won.

Once he claimed the office, Obi faced twin nemeses: a state legislature dominated by PDP members, and former President Olusegun Obasanjo, a man whose middle name should be mischief. The former president made no secret of his desire to hand the governorship of Anambra to his ward, Emmanuel Nnamdi (Andy) Uba. Encouraged by Aso Rock, the state legislators impeached Obi in a process that was transparently fraudulent. Again, many Nigerians rooted for him and celebrated when the judiciary restored him to office.

Obi's come-back achieved dramatic culmination when he persuaded the Supreme Court to find that he had yet to serve out his four-year term as governor, and to oust the impostor, Mr. Uba. His victory triggered a paroxysm of jubilation not only in Anambra but also throughout Nigeria and abroad.

In fact, Obi's triumph came to symbolize a promising dawn for the judiciary as well as the potential for democratic flowering in a country that continually hovers on the edge of despair.

A man with Obi's political biography should have governed with a sense of history. He might have surrounded himself with the best talent in every area to enable him to succeed.

Instead, Obi appeared to have misread his political fortune as evidence of his genius. By many accounts, he became impervious to advice, however sound. He began to relish the company of court jesters who fed his ego. He began to court a man with the unsavory antecedents of Chuma Nzeribe, a member of the House of Representatives who's hardly associated with admirable causes. Instead of delegating duties, he began to function as if he and he alone enjoyed a monopoly of wisdom in the state.

Even before this cash scandal, Obi had disappointed many who expected him to help transform his political party into an institution possessed of gravitas, instead of the ragtag it's become. Under his watch, doctors went on strike for several months because the governor waved them off instead of engaging them in respectful negotiation. His verbal run-ins with his deputy, Mrs. Virgy Etiaba, as well as Ngige left the impression of a man whose personal limitations have confounded his public office.

It'd be hard to forgive Obi if it turns out that he's been fiddling with public funds. Anambra needs all the money it can get for the great challenge of development. Awka, the state capital, is in a shameful state, an eyesore. The state's

infrastructure is dismal and requires a lot of cash to fix.

Obi liked to say he was a man of means long before he sought the office of governor. I heard him tell a gathering that if he stole one kobo of Anambra funds, he'd invite God to unleash wrath on him as well as his children.

I hope - for the sake of the long-suffering people of Anambra - that it was not a hypocrite who uttered that sentiment.

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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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