

# The Scandal called “Security Vote”

Monday, 15 June 2009

*By Okey Ndibe*

The far from resolved drama of the N250 million cash which police officers reportedly discovered in a convoy of cars belonging to Anambra State points to a peculiarly Nigerian scandal.

The scandal’s name is “security vote.”

Nigerian officials have a penchant for taking an otherwise good concept and bastardizing it.

Take the idea of executive immunity. In the U.S., a serving president or governor is shielded from litigation in his or her personal capacity for all acts and decisions that fall within the legitimate purview of his or her office. Mark that officials are protected from prosecution for acts that are, as a rule, both legitimate in character and consistent with the job specification.

Corrupt enrichment is neither legitimate nor part of the tasks that voters hire a governor or president to discharge. A U.S. governor who dips his or her hands in the public treasury is apt to invite the ire of taxpayers and a visit from agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Last December, FBI agents stormed the residence of then Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich. A handsome, dashing man who briefly dabbled in boxing, Blagojevich was apparently something of a rogue politician. His troubles began after Barack Obama was elected

president. It fell to Blagojevich to choose a replacement for the Senate seat the then president-elect had to relinquish.

For the governor, Obama’s seat was a bait to be used in a scheme to rake in cash. According to the FBI, Blagojevich decided to auction the seat to the highest bidder. In numerous taped telephone conversations, he told aides and relatives about his plan to cash in.

Not so fast, said law enforcement agents, who arrested and shackled the governor. They then announced a wide-ranging indictment on federal corruption charges, including solicitation of bribery. On January 29, 2009 the Illinois State Senate voted 59-0 to impeach Blagojevich.

Were Blagojevich a governor in Nigeria, he would still be at his desk today, gloating as if nothing was amiss. The reason is that Nigerian “rulers” enshrined a perverted version of immunity in their constitution. The Nigerian brand of immunity protects a governor even when he betrays his oath of office by committing a crime. Indeed, especially then.

If the Nigerian doctrine of immunity is weird and counterproductive, the idea of security vote is plain wacky - nothing short of a crime in itself.

Each month, Nigerian taxpayers hand billions of naira to the president and state

governors in the name of security vote. Each governor receives a few hundred million naira in this slush fund said to be for security purposes.

Bizarre as this “vote” is, what’s even more unbelievable is that each governor is given the absolute prerogative to dispose of the funds as he deems fit, with no oversight whatever.

That kind of license is a recipe for scandal, fraud and abuse. It’s common knowledge that many governors, in the past and now, simply pocket the money. If you dare to ask where the money went, you become – yes – a security threat.

It’s been suggested that the N250 million being ferreted away by Governor Peter Obi’s aides was the monthly security vote. Obi has yet to offer a convincing rebuttal to allegations that, each month, he freighted the security cash to Lagos and “voted” it into his personal account.

To leave so much cash in one man’s unsupervised hands is to encourage unconscionable diversion of public funds in a country where the basic facilities that create a habitable space are lacking. Access to such easy cash explains the desperation and violence with which Nigerian politicians seek political offices.

Who exactly came up with this deranged notion of security vote? The inventor of this scam deserves Nigerians’ collective scorn.

For running the world’s most powerful country, President Obama earns a little more than \$400,000. The man doesn’t have one cent of public funds he can spend without answering to the Congress. Why then do Nigerians permit

their governors – most of them inept at their job – to cart away the equivalent of \$2 million per month, no questions asked?

In America, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has a budget to enable it to carry out its intelligence operations. Owing to the covert nature of its work, the agency does not give a public accounting of how it spends its money. Even so, the agency has accountability obligations, including classified briefings to a select committee of Congress.

Nigerian politicians took from the CIA the idea of concealing how security votes are spent. But they forgot that, in the U.S. and elsewhere, the security funds are handled by agencies with highly trained professionals, not handed out as largesse to politicians seized more by greed than vision.

Nigerians should insist that security vote be expunged – voted out – from their political playbook.

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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*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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