

## **ON CORRUPTION, MONEY BAG POLITICS AND 2007**

**Pat Utomi**

Nigerians are caught in awkward dilemma. They are fed up with corrupt politicians and the damage corruption has inflicted on the possibilities of human material advance in Nigeria. But they have come, somehow to internalize the view that running for high office necessarily involves lots of money. In other words only thieves, moneybags, and agents of godfathers can hope to win. INEC Chairman, Maurice Iwu thinks differently. He has promised to stop corrupt politicians and is avowed to limiting the place of money in the elections of 2007. EFCC's Nuhu Ribadu shares the same point of view and has promised to inoculate the 2007 elections with a vaccine that will send corrupt politicians to extinction.

In spite of these promises, I find, as I traverse the vast terrain of our blessed but bruised fatherland, preaching the coming of the age of change. I discovered that people long dearly for change, hunger for servant leaders, thirst for politicians that can be trusted to be motivated solely by the Common Good, but they are somehow cynical about the capacity and the will of the system to stop the parasites who will use that which they have stolen from the people to steal their mandate and hold the people hostage. In truth many have lost confidence in the electoral process. They ask why bother to vote.... I find people are still quite cynical.

Often I turn to human history to show how it took the passion of a few to restore hope and reclaim lost promise. When I tell them that I am a witness to promise and look to being a tribute to hope, someday, I see a desperate yearning to hang on to those words but the sense of helplessness that is the mood of this land remains palpable and worrisome. The threat to peace of mind and the light of progress so very obvious from corruption, and the corrupt use of ill-gotten money to abuse

the universal sovereign right to determine who the leaders should be by the casting of one ballot, remains.

The pity with the pervasive thinking that elections are about tons of money and thugs, unconsciously projected by media analysis, was a phenomenon of rarity in the age of promise when our new nation looked with confidence into a brave new future at independence. A tribute to that is found in the fact that quite a few of the great heroes of our nationalists' struggles who fought for independence died as people of very modest material means. The very powerful Sarduna of Sokoto and Premier of Northern Nigeria had but so little at death in 1966. Same can be said of Dr. Micheal Okpara, even in later years, and of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, Aminu Kano and others. In the wilderness years that followed their exit our examples are getting fewer, leaving the grave danger that our youth may imagine that public life is about emptying the treasury into private pockets so you can have the war chest to influence future elections to stay relevant.

From the wilderness years we, fortunately have the limited examples of the stoic ascetism of a General Muhammadu Buhari and the decent gentility of a General Yakubu Gowon. If we do not consciously seek to show different kind of roles models about electioneering and election funding in 2007 we may find that the future of elections in Nigeria will be in jeopardy. That is why the Obasanjo regime's anti-corruption crusade must get our applause.

Role models matter. Many times when I speak to young people and they seek insight into my values and why I have had the discipline of looking away from abusing public trust for self enrichment when I advocate a free enterprise model generally portrayed as being about accumulating profits, I talk about two influences.

One was about arriving at events with former Administrator of East Central State, Ajie Ukpabi Asika, either in an ageing Peugeot 504 or a VW Santana that was not factory fresh. I noted how his arrival had a great "presence" than that of some others who arrived in S Class Mercedes, many of who rush forward to greet him. That early in my career it sank into my consciousness that it is not about what you have but what you are. A man constitutes in being not in having. This is why I say without ceasing that a man's self worth far outweighs his network.

The second point I make to young people is drawn from faith and devotion to a Spanish Saint who lived more than 400 years ago, St. Theresa of Avila. One of my favourite reflections from her thoughts on "The Way of Perfection" says "It is when I possess least that I have the fewest worries and the Lord knows that, as far as I can tell, I am more afflicted when there is excess of anything than that there is least".

I have indeed been asking if this view is not at odds with my views on free enterprise and I say No. Free enterprise provides the freedom to be co-creators with God to move creation towards its perfection. If your endowments bring you excess returns your conscience should challenge how you use it to make society better. Gladly, Bill and Melinda Gates, their friend Warren Buffet, Ted Turner and others have been making my point with action. Compared with Marxist dogma which took away the freedom to create, in Soviet Russia, the reason I favor free enterprise should be obvious.

Back to our politics, money and 2007. How can we save Nigeria by killing the role of money and imposing a regime of contestation of ideas. The most practical way is to teach young people how their energies makes a difference elsewhere, and to get average people to recognize that their small contributions to back an idea that improves their lot does a lot more good than peanuts they will receive from those who

cannot but raid the public treasury because of the huge financial investment they are making in getting elected or rigged into office. Professor Iwu may therefore do a lot more through massive commitment of resources, if they will make it available to him, to voters education.

The year 2007 provides us a good window of opportunity to change campaign finance traditions in Nigeria, get the people to take ownership of party agenda with their small contributions being the main source of party funding, and encourage students to spread into neighbourhoods canvassing the election of candidates they support as their colleagues do in America and elsewhere. Unless Nigerian politics moves from fat cats, rent champions and war Lords who believe elections are to be bought and rigged, to middle class people focused on the issues, we may never be able to tame the greater killer that corruption is. One way to deal with this is to educate people to take the money and vote their conscience for the future of their children and the well being of all

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