

# Through the eyes of Sonny Okogwu.

By Edwin Madunagu

CHIEF Sonny Okogwu, the Delta State-born Kaduna-based businessman, is very much like Chief Arthur Nzeribe, except that the former is not a professional politician. Or rather, he is not an "electoral politician" like Nzeribe. But he is a leading member of the political class - the class of mainstream or establishment politicians. Okogwu has several attributes in common with Nzeribe, but I am focusing here on Okogwu's "outspokenness" as an Establishment politician. He speaks freely and openly on axioms of power (in the sense of Nicolo Machiavelli) and in doing this, often reveals what can be called "class secrets".

As an outsider, I can afford to be outspoken on high-profile intrigues and struggles within and between, the ruling blocs. But a leading Establishment politician would be expected to stop short of revealing the secrets that belong to the ruling classes as a whole. This rule is however not obeyed by some politicians and "power brokers" (to use Okogwu's terms). Nzeribe and Okogwu are two such politicians. Their outspokenness is often an embarrassment to other Establishment politicians. But the polity as a whole benefits. This type of "outspokenness" - which must also be critically assessed - often saves us from chasing shadows.

I shall illustrate with an incident - involving Chief Nzeribe - during General Babangida's transition. The year was 1991 or 1992. Chief Nzeribe had contested the presidential primaries of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) whose results were rejected by all the contestants except one, the winner. Nzeribe was one of the losers. Of all the arguments advanced by Nzeribe for rejecting the result of the primaries the one that annoyed him most was that in rigging the election, sc. ne of the contestants did not respect their opponents' "spheres of influence". This protocol on rigging was

however disregarded by some contestants. How could someone, an opponent come and rig in Nzeribe's backyard. And this angered Nzeribe more than any other electoral malpractice. Other party leaders - winners and losers alike - were thoroughly embarrassed not by what happened but by what Nzeribe said - not in a party caucus, but openly in the public. That is one attribute Okogwu shares with Nzeribe.

I have never met Chief Sonny Okogwu; not have I ever seen him. But I can guess his material circumstances and some of his personal tastes - from what I have read and seen. He is the immediate elder brother of General Ibrahim Babangida's wife. He is said to be a "multi-billionaire aviation magnate" and to be living in a "famous ship house" in Kaduna. Although it has not been credibly suggested that Okogwu's stupendous wealth is attributable to his relationship with General Babangida, I would have been shocked if he was not wealthy. When next I visit Kaduna I would love to see his house, although I can guess what it looks like - taking a cue from the hotel said to be owned by him in Asaba, capital of his home state, the Delta State.

The main concern of this piece is Sonny Okogwu's "outspokenness" in the Establishment politics of Nigeria. I am basing my brief survey on recent interviews with two media organisations: *The Week* magazine, July 10, 2006 and *Sunday Independent*, July 16, 2006. I shall proceed by extracting some pronouncements from the two interviews and providing commentaries where necessary - for most of Okogwu's pronouncements are so clear in contents and implications that commentaries would only debase them.

We may start with the newsmagazine. In it Okogwu recalled that he was the first person to openly state publicly, that there was an agreement to the effect that President Obasanjo would be in office for only one

term 1999-2003. Thereafter, he would hand over (probably) to a Northerner. The implication here is that the often mentioned 2003 re-endorsement of the 1999 agreement on the movement of Nigeria's presidency, was actually an extension of the period of validity of that agreement from four years (1999-2003) to eight years (1999-2007). The agreement was packaged and signed, by the "power brokers", according to Okogwu.

Chief Okogwu's pronouncements in the interview however, went beyond the agreement. He made several embarrassing "revelations". Let us do a sampling. On the June 12, 1993 presidential election which Chief Moshood Abiola won, but which the military regime annulled, Okogwu said that Abiola committed a "tactical blunder" by "sidelining" Chief Arthur Nzeribe. The latter reacted by going to court. The court stopped the election; and the military regime obeyed the court order. On responsibility for the annulment, Okogwu said: "Top Yoruba politicians, chiefs and businessmen worked day and night to ensure Abiola did not become president, but all is now history". So, were Nzeribe "top Yoruba politicians", and General Babangida playing their parts in a common strategy?

On the aftermath of the collapse of the "third-term" agenda, Okogwu said: "You people were jubilating when the National Assembly killed or rather threw out the draft constitution that will elongate Obasanjo's term in office. The man (Obasanjo) is angry more than ever before. He is now wild and ready to fight. The so-called issue of asking PDP governors to choose a presidential aspirant is just a play to cause problem in PDP, the ruling party and we have in good authority that Obasanjo will not hand over next year. He will try to cause problems all over the country to stay in power. But, I can

assure you, he will be pushed out and Atiku will head an interim government that will hand over to IBB (General Babangida) in 2008". No comment is necessary.

On the current political status of General Babangida: "Yes, I told you earlier Obasanjo and IBB are still very close, Yes, IBB deputises for Obasanjo whenever Obasanjo is outside the country, yes IBB still occupies some chalet in the Villa, but the issue is Babangida is a phenomenon, you need him more than he needs you". On the threat of disqualification of Babangida: "Ribadu cannot stop Atiku, Buhari, IBB from contesting the presidency. Ribadu should be careful. Let him see what is happening to Al-Mustapha. If Atiku becomes president tomorrow where will he run to?" On the stature of Obasanjo's ministers and advisers: "This government is in a mess. Some people who claimed to be super advisers, super minister, and super chairman, Board of Trustees have failed the President, their so-called intelligence have failed Obasanjo, we need the likes of Fani Kayode to scare enemies of the President, I commend the Senate for clearing him". No comment.

We may now go to the second publication, the lead front page story in the *Sunday Independent* of July 16, 2006. The story titled, Okogwu to South-South: stage a coup if you want presidency, appears like an exclusive interview with one of the paper's reporters in Kaduna. Chief Okogwu felt that his compatriots in the South-South geopolitical zone who are not agitating for the presidency in 2007 are, to say the least, unreasonable. He was surprised that they did not realise that it was not their turn. In any case, he told the newspaper, "If we from the South-South had wanted to have a president, we should have done so by going through a coup or were there no Generals in the zone to stage a coup?" He angrily re-iterated that it was the turn of the North to produce the

President in 2007, according to a standing agreement.

It is either Okogwu does not believe in the geopolitical division of the country into six zones, including the South-South zone, or he does not think this division should have anything to do with the distribution of federal political power which he said should rotate between the North, the East and the West. These were the pre-1963 political units into which the country was divided. He excluded the old Mid-West which was created in 1963. His words: "We from the South-South should ensure that we remain as Eastern Region if we want to capture the seat of president. Within Eastern region, we cannot have South-South and South-East struggling to capture power at the same time; it won't work". Perhaps, not satisfied that he had made himself clear enough, Chief Sonny Okogwu emphasised: "Nigeria is basically divided into three regions: the West, the East and the North; and since these regions have at different times produced a president, it is necessary in the interest of equity and fairness to allow the North produce the next president".

Further down in the report, one gets the impression that Chief Okogwu does not include military regimes in the analysis of the movement of federal power (that is, Head of State) since independence. Furthermore, he believes - and this appears to contradict his attitude to power - that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (the ceremonial President) was the person actually in power during the First Republic (1960-1966) and not Alhaji Tafawa Balewa (the executive Prime Minister): Hear him: "We had late Nnamdi Azikiwe from the East as the President in the 1960s; Alhaji Shehu Shagari from 1979 to 1984 from the North, and the incumbent President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo from the West. They were all democratically elected; so, there has never been any region that was cheated in the history of leadership". No comment.