Iwu’s Lone Voice

Contributed by Dan Agbese
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Maurice Iwu, chairman, National Electoral Commission, INEC, has been saying what is,certainly, not music to the ears of the tin gods in the political parties. He is particularly riled by the way the PDP imposed Charles Soludo as its governorship candidate for the February 2010 election in Anambra State. The Daily Trust of November 26, quoted him as saying that the political parties are run like fiefdoms. He rhetorically asked, in reference to what the PDP did in Anambra State: “You start a process and you cannot obey your internal rules?” Iwu presented a paper at the Newswatch colloquium on Democracy, Electoral Reforms and Good Governance in Lagos, December 8. Again, he talked about the lack of internal democracy in the political parties. He said: “The serious problem of lack of internal democracy by political parties…which manifested in distorted primaries in 2007 elections, an ugly tendency which has reared its head…in Anambra State, is an example of a situation outside the control of the election management body, but which affects the quality of the standard of democracy it delivers.” I was at the colloquium. I witnessed Iwu’s presentation. I saw his pain. I saw in him for the first time a man determined to do well for his country but who feels hemmed in by the political party barons who respect no laws and whose collective middle name is impunity. And my heart went out to him. I know that no one is listening to him. My heart went out to my country. Because I know that no matter how much we pretend to the contrary, our country is hostage to the honourable men in the political parties who are playing God at our collective expense and at the expense of the future of our democracy. Democracy begins with the internal conduct of the political parties. If there is no democracy at that level, there can be no democracy at the national level. And that is why we have problems defining our democracy. I am one of Iwu’s critics. His combative defence of the conduct of the 2007 general elections did not sit well with my sense of decency. I said so. I still say so. But I understand his current frustration with the political parties. They did it to him in 2007. They are set to do it again in 2010 and 2011. The 2011 general elections are as good as over. We have been told time and again that there are no vacancies in Aso Rock and government houses in states with first term governors. There are no vacancies in the legislative houses at federal and state levels either. Our democracy is in trouble. So long as there is no internal democracy in the political parties; so long as a few powerful men decide the fate of all party members and deny them their inalienable right to participate in politics for the purposes of realising their political ambitions; and so long as these few honourable men rape all laws with so much impunity and anoint their godsons and daughters, so long will our elections be a sham and our country the laughing stock of the international community. Maurice Iwu has an impossible job, the job of conducting elections that have been rigged nearly two years in advance in the political parties by the political parties. We are not listening to the message. We are looking at the messenger. In reactions typical of people conditioned to regard hard thinking as a luxury, we are busy looking for the motives for Iwu’s candour. We cannot find it in us to accept that the man who conducted the 2007 general elections roundly condemned by all but stoutly defended by him, has no ulterior motive in alerting the country to the danger now and the dangers ahead. We are told that Iwu has two motives for standing up to the political parties, particularly the PDP. We are told that he wants to stop Soludo because Obasanjo gave INEC contract to the then CBN governor. And he chopped alone. We are told that Iwu wants to stop Soludo to clear the way for Andy Uba, said to have been responsible for his appointment as INEC chairman. It is time to return the favour, we hear. These fanciful tales taste well. Fiction does. Always. This is not about Iwu and his personal interests. This is about Nigeria, its democracy and its future. Those who appreciate what Iwu is saying fear that in taking on the PDP, he has a death wish. Not so. Iwu was a Nigerian before he became INEC chairman. When he ceases to be chairman, he will still remain a Nigerian. He does not have a death wish but the patriotic zeal to bring some honour and respect to the conduct of our elections. Is that so bad? Political conviction is a strange thing in our national politics but it is not responsible for the frequent exodus of aggrieved persons from one party to another. Lack of internal democracy is the destabilising force. The lack of internal democracy in the political parties makes the politics of bitterness inevitable. We are in a dilemma. The courts have affirmed that what the parties do is entirely internal to them and cannot be questioned. So Charles Soludo can contest. I have problems with that. In his landmark judgement that gave Ladoja, Dariye and Obi back their jobs, Mr Justice James Ogebe, now of the Supreme Court, said: “The court is the primary custodian of the constitution,” and therefore, has the power to enquire into anything done under it. The political parties are not age-group associations. They are creatures of the constitution. Without them, no man or woman can seek an elective office. I believe the court has a duty to defend the right of a Nigerian citizen to seek an elective office in a manner stipulated by the constitution, ie through a political party. The party primaries is vital to the process of exercising that right. If party barons are judicially permitted to abbreviate that right they elevate the party constitution above the country’s constitution - and make Nigerian democracy peculiar.