Orji's "Non-Indigenes Must Go" Policy Draws the Flak

Contributed by Victor Ugborgu
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The decision by Theodore Orji, governor of Abia State, to sack non-indigenes in the state’s civil service is widely condemned by his own kinsmen

Theodore Orji, governor of Abia State, seems to have bitten more than he can swallow when he decided last month to sack all non-indigenes in the state’s public service. Don Ubani, commissioner for Information and Strategy, had explained that the state executive council decided to transfer non-indigenes in its public service to their states of origin to create openings for indigenes of Abia State who were displaced in the northern part of the country. The commissioner claimed that many of the returnees had complained to the state governor who then decided to reabsorb them at the expense of non-indigenes. Ubani stressed that no amount of negative campaign would change the arrangement. He urged states whose indigenes were affected by the exercise to create chances for them. “You will recall that sometime ago, there was crisis in the north, many Abians, who were working in the north were forced to come back home. Those of them that lost their jobs as a result of the crisis were to be reabsorbed in the public service of Abia State and they are in their hundreds, if not thousands,” Ubani claimed. The government maintained that the financial burden imposed on it by the N18, 000 minimum wage was too much and so needed to shed off some of its workforce. Newswatch gathered that many members of the National Youth Service Corps, NYSC, from different states that were retained by the government of Orji Uzor Kalu, for excellent performance, were also affected by the unpopular policy. Anthony Agbazuere, special adviser to the governor on Conflicts Management, justified the government’s action, insisting that the issue of transfer of non-indigenes to their states of origin did not start with Abia. “States like Imo, Enugu, among others, had done this in the past. It must be stated that this class of workers were not sacked, but had their services transferred to their home states as is also done whenever a new state is created. One cannot compromise his immediate family because of extended family,” he argued. He also noted that a contract of employment in any state could not be taken as a fundamental right. Agbazuere might not be totally wrong. Before 1999, the military governor of Enugu state sacked non-indigenes from the civil service. But the government of Chimaroke Nnamani reversed the policy instituted by the military administration and reinstated the affected workers. Nnamani insisted that Enugu, being the capital of old eastern Nigeria, should serve as a rallying point for all easterners. But Nigerians from all walks of life have vehemently condemned the decision, describing it as a primitive approach to governance, capable of straining the robust relationship that existed between Abia and states whose indigenes were affected. By this step, Abia State government is advocating that all the state indigenes working in other states should come back home to pick employment. The governor has continued to receive knocks and different forms of embarrassing comments over his decision to implement the unpopular indigenisation policy. Orji was booed by angry youths at the burial of Eudora Iwuanyanwu, wife of Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu in Ikeduru, on October 6. Chinwoke Mbadinuju, former governor of Anambra State, condemned the policy, saying it would not serve any good purpose. He denied ever introducing such retrogressive policy during his tenure, because there was no justification for such action. “If I were the governor, I will not introduce such unpopular policy because it is the same Igbo people that will suffer it. When I was governor, I had a large number of non-indigenes in the civil service, yet they were accommodated and paid. People should be encouraged to be integrated in the states they found themselves,” he said. Mbadinuju advised other South-East governors not to toe Orji’s line because of its destructive tendencies. “Other governors should table the matter at their meetings. They should talk about it and try to phase out this ugly trend, even though it could have been driven by the economy of the state. It is not a good policy,” he told Newswatch. Mike Uda, Chief Press Secretary to Peter Obi, governor of Anambra State, said the action of Abia State government was the least expected in the current democratic dispensation. He said the Anambra State government had concluded arrangement to reabsorb the sacked workers. He advised governor Orji to reverse the policy in the interest of peace and harmony among Ndigbo and Nigerians in general as nothing is cast on stone. “No sane government will welcome such an unpopular policy. It is not good for the unity of Ndigbo. As an individual, I have not heard such a thing before,” he told Newswatch. Uda, however, said the government of Peter Obi was yet to decide whether or not to send packing Abia indigenes in Civil Service. Already, the move has pitted the state against Imo, the parent state from where Abia was carved out in 1991. Imo State indigenes were greatly affected. Rochas Okorocha, governor of the state, has been under pressure to lay off workers of Abia State origin to pave way for displaced civil servants of Imo origin affected by the obnoxious policy. Okorocha appointed no fewer than eight Abia citizens in his cabinet. Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and other Igbo speaking states are also considering mass disengagement of Abia citizens from their states. The association of Anambra State development unions, Aba chapter, described the government’s action as “ill wind blowing across the country,” with no beneficiaries. Members of the clergy have also declared war on Orji and his government over its indigenisation policy. Lucius Ugorji, Catholic Bishop of Umuahia Diocese, said the payment of N18,000 minimum wage to workers was not a justifiable reason for the state government to sack thousands of non-indigenes who have worked in the state for decades and contributed to its development. Ugorji called on the government to rescind the decision which has presented the state in bad light to the whole world. Ben Ogu, parish priest of St. Paul’s Catholic Church, Egbelu-Umuhu, Mbaise, said Orji should be declared persona-non-grata in all states of the country. “Governor Orji ought to be sanctioned for destabilising the Igbo nation. He should not be allowed to use any road or airport not built by Abia State government. He should be declared persona non grata by other states of the federation. We have a dumb leadership in Igboland, otherwise royal fathers, governors, religious leaders and political bigwigs in Igboland would have called the erring governor to order for destabilising the nation,” he said. Similarly, Stanford

Nwaogu, bishop of Praise Centre Ministries, Owerri, described as shameful the policy which led to the removal of names of non-indigenes from the payroll of Abia State. The bishop wondered why people should be sacked from a place they should ordinarily call their home. Nwaogu said it would have been more tolerable if the despicable act was perpetrated elsewhere and not in Igboland. “Most Nigerian leaders are self-conscious instead of people- centred. God gave Nigeria more than enough to move the nation forward and improve the welfare of its citizens but we have continued to stagnate at 51,” he said. The Aba branch of the Nigeria Bar Association, NBA, condemned the conduct of labelling fellow Nigerians from other states non-indigenes. The NBA said the mass disengagement of duly employed public servants “is ungodly, unlawful, and highly discriminatory and amounts to unabashed desecration of the fundamental rights provision of the constitution of Nigeria and African Charter on Human and Peoples Right Act.” It said the decision would “gravely, adversely and negatively impact on the existing and future family bond and unity” of the people of Nigeria. In a resolution, after its meeting held in Aba, the lawyers noted that the decision by the government would sow the undesirable seed of social, economic and political discord, chaos and disorder among other states where Abians are employed. Apart from that, the NBA said the move was also capable of scaring potential or chasing away existing investors, industrialists, suitors and well meaning citizens who would want to invest in the state. A few days ago, Human Rights, Justice and Peace Foundation, a non-profit organisation, initiated a legal battle against the state over the issue. The foundation noted that it was unfair to tell those who have put in 10 to 15 years or more in Abia’s public service to go home without their full pension and other benefits.