

Okoi Obono-Obla opens up: Nigeria lost over \$500 billion to corruption under Buhari

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Suspended Chairman of the Special Presidential Investigation Panel for the Recovery of Public Property (SPIP), has dropped a bombshell on how key actors within former President Muhammadu Buhari's administration looted funds recovered from public officials and also blocked avenues to recover for government, property illegally acquired by high profile government officials. Obono-Obla revealed that \$2 billion and 850 million gold bars were found in the home of a minister during the Goodluck Jonathan's administration; brand new 87 armoured-plated Mercedes Benz S Class and so many other vehicles, including three-wheel motorcycles were found in the home of a Director of Works in Jabi; an N800 million house in Asokoro, Abuja, among others. Obono-Obla who spoke exclusively with Sunday Sun in Abuja exposed how members of the Buhari inner circle, halted the war against corruption and eventually got him out of the way for corruption to thrive. While passing a damning verdict on the anti-corruption war fought by the Buhari's administration, Obono-Obla insisted that corruption is fuelling insecurity in the country.

you are a household name and a thorough investigator; you have been off the public glare for some time now, what happened?

I have been, but you know when I was the Chairman of a Special Presidential Investigation Panel for the Recovery of Public Property, I was suspended I think in August 2019. So, I had to go underground. And so many false allegations were made against me. All those things had been thrown out by the courts. So, I am available. I have been around and I have been participating in all national activities, politics and other fields.

Yes, you were suspended, but did you really need to go underground? Why did you go underground?

At first, I left the country, to be candid because my life was endangered. I did a lot of dangerous investigations. For instance, \$2 billion was recovered from the house of a minister in Goodluck Jonathan's government in Wuse, Abuja, by a team from the Department of State Security Service (DSS).

Did you say two million or two billion dollars?

Yes, two billion dollars.

You mean in Cash?

The money was recovered and eight hundred and fifty million gold bars. But that money was never handed over to the government.

Where did the money go to?

Well, I knew this from a petition that was written by one



Major General Adamu Yusuf, who was a whistle blower. You remember that time they were asking Nigerians to blow whistle. He was the person who had gone to the president and Abba Kyari, to report this issue. And then, the normal thing, after reporting and investigations are carried out, whatever is recovered, you will be entitled to a commission. So, he was not paid his commission. He got angry and they will not pick his calls. He said Abba Kyari will not pick his calls and they cut him off. He couldn't see the president. He was frustrated. He went to the EFCC, they didn't have the courage; he went to ICPC, they didn't have the courage. So, he came to me, my panel and my Director of Operations was an Assistant Commissioner of Police. He investigated and interviewed over seven persons, including Chuma Nzeribe, from Anambra.

And they all agreed that they knew where the money was. So, they took him, they took the team, DSS during the time of Lawal Daura as the Director-General of the DSS. They went there and recovered the money. So, the money was never declared. He got angry and petitioned. We did an investigation, preliminary investigation and everything was pointing to Abba Kyari. I told myself, look, this is the President's Chief of Staff, I can't go to the Villa and arrest him, I can't invite him, the President should know. So, I did a memo to the President. When I did a memo, the ADC to the President had told me, because there was a time I wanted to resign. There was so much pressure on me; the government was not cooperating, so I told my friend, Osita Okechukwu, from Enugu State. I told him I was going to resign. He said no, I will embarrass the President, that he will create an avenue for me to see the president. So, he did. I saw Mr President and briefed him on what I was doing and everything. And he asked me who were the people disturbing me and so on and so forth. Thereafter, he said Obla, go and do your work. As I was leaving the President's office, his ADC came and said oh, Obla, this job you are doing, if you send anything to the President, they will waylay it and stop it. So, anything you think the President should see, pass it through my office. So, I did. I gave that memo to him and he kept it for one month. One evening, he called me that I should come to the Villa. I went there and he said Obla, this thing is too hot ooo! Just go and do other cases, leave this one.

Who said so?

The then ADC to the President. Those were some of the cases I did and they were very dangerous. And then, the Attorney-General didn't help matters. He was against me, Malami, totally. Unfortunately, we are friends because before we came into government, I was running his law office in Abuja, Number 15, Gimbiya Street. But when we came into government, he didn't like me. They told him that maybe I was interested in the Attorney-General's office. That was what Hausa people told him. He started fighting me and they did everything to frustrate me until they brought those trump up charges against me. They didn't see anything. I didn't do anything. I didn't have

anything. I went into government with what I had when I was a lawyer in practice and then, when I came out of government, nothing. So, all the allegations they made, they couldn't find anything. But I think they wanted to remove me by all means because I was very courageous. I went into areas that other anti-corruption agencies refused to, including this Abba Kyari's case. So, that is one of the reasons when I was removed... I was suspended. They didn't even dismiss me. They suspended me. They withdrew my police team that was used to give me protection. So, I thought that my life was in danger after I had stepped on a lot of toes, including one of the cases I did with the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) concerning one senator who was in the military and governor, who had so much things outside the country, the Caribbean, this offshore island where they launder money. These things, I didn't have the capacity, I wrote to the DG of NIA after a scandal broke out in the international community about some people, some business people, some politicians who were into money laundering, the Panama Papers. We did the investigation and a report was given to me by the NIA DG which I passed on to Malami to give to the President and nothing was done about the person. So, all those kinds of dangerous cases I investigated, when they removed me, I told myself I should go underground, and otherwise, they may kill me.

Can you remember other high profile cases you handled and how they ended?

One of them was one Director of Works from Borno State. He was very notorious; he had a lot of money and property. We were given information and we stormed a warehouse in Jabi. We found about 87 armoured plated Mercedes Benz S Class brand new and so many other vehicles, including these three-wheel motorcycles that Boko Haram people use. They were very suspicious. So, we sealed up the place and there was a lot of pressure on me. One of my friends, a former minister, Sadiya, called me one day. She was then the Federal Commissioner, National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons. She told me ah, Obla, Tunde reported you ooo. I said, which Tunde? She said ah, Tunde who is Personal Assistant to the President.

Tunde Sabiu?

Yes. I said ah, I didn't even know him; I used to hear about him. She said ah, he reported you ooo. I said, what did I do? She said ah, you were fighting them. So, I told her. I said Sadiya, I don't understand. Why will you say I am fighting them? I am working for Mr President. Who am I fighting? So, all those people... We went to court and the court gave us order that we should take those properties, seal up his property and houses and farms and so on and so forth. So, we did. And I made a letter to the Attorney-General, included everything, the court order and they started fighting back, the man himself. The brother was the first Interim Secretary of the All Progressives

Congress (APC). In 2015 when former President Muhammadu Buhari was elected, his victory was greeted with applause because Nigerians felt he was coming to fight corruption and return Nigeria to normalcy. But few months after Buhari came in, everything died down and his anti-corruption crusade did not succeed.

What derailed that mantra?

Well, so many factors! I think it was the type of people that were in the kitchen cabinet, particularly Malami whom I worked with. I think his attitude to corruption was ambivalent. It was ambivalent. They were close to him, so maybe they were able to influence him and then he derailed. You know he went after me, he went after (Ibrahim) Magu and these were the strongest anti-corruption fighters. We were. So, after I was removed or suspended, about six months, Magu was removed. That killed the war against corruption.

Looking back, how would you assess the Buhari's administration?

I think that they were not honest because that was why I put my life on the line. I thought that they were genuine.

What were the things he did well and the things he did wrong?

Well, I don't want to say that Nigerians were very disappointed. Personally, I decided to be in his camp because I thought he was honest. When I was growing up,

I think my first year in the university that he took over power, he did a lot to clean up the country and because of that record, that reputation, when he came into politics, I joined his political camp. I really believed that he was going to help clean up the country, but at the end of the day, there was no will.

So, you agree that Buhari failed?

Well, as far as the war against corruption is concerned, he didn't record any success.

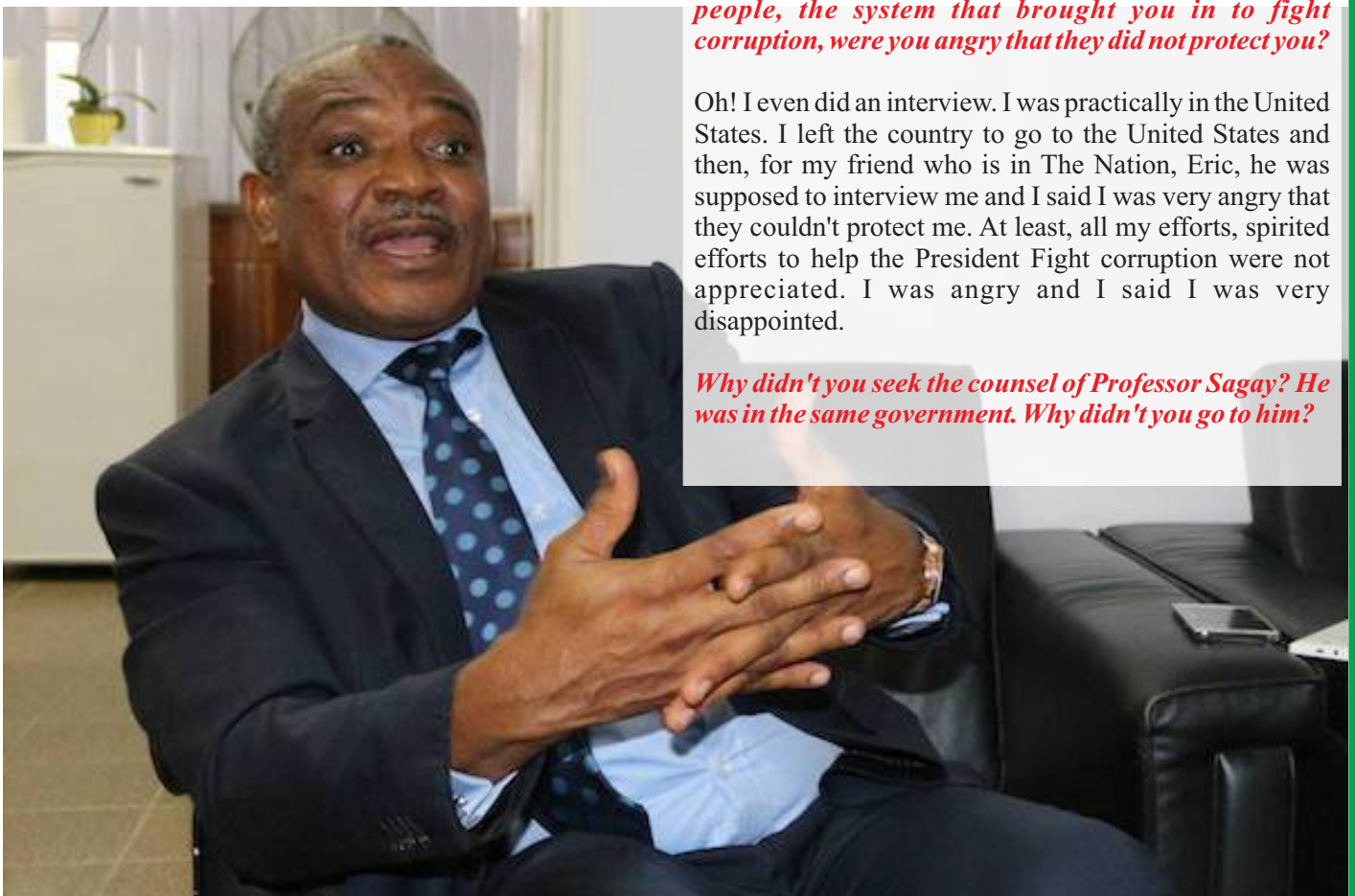
How about the war against insurgency and the revamping of the economy?

I think in terms of infrastructure, there was an attempt to really provide some infrastructure or restored our infrastructure that had broken down completely. But for the war against insurgency, well, maybe to the little extent that there were no bombings in Abuja because I was around in 2012, 2013, and 2014 when there were a lot of bombings in Abuja. At least, throughout his eight years period, there were no bombs in Abuja. But in the far North, I don't think the problem of Boko Haram has been dealt with. Another issue came up, banditry, which is still hunting us till now. So, I won't score him highly in that regard. Maybe for Abuja, but I don't think he was able to stamp out Boko Haram or even the banditry or kidnapping that we have.

Looking back, at the time you said you had to run out of the country for safety, were you angry that the same people, the system that brought you in to fight corruption, were you angry that they did not protect you?

Oh! I even did an interview. I was practically in the United States. I left the country to go to the United States and then, for my friend who is in The Nation, Eric, he was supposed to interview me and I said I was very angry that they couldn't protect me. At least, all my efforts, spirited efforts to help the President Fight corruption were not appreciated. I was angry and I said I was very disappointed.

Why didn't you seek the counsel of Professor Sagay? He was in the same government. Why didn't you go to him?



Let me tell you a story. It was so complex. Professor Femi Odekunle, he was a member of the Presidential Advisory Committee against Corruption. He called me one day. I don't know who gave him my number and I went to his house, an elderly person, in Wuse. And then, he told me ah, that I am very radical, that my approach to fighting corruption was radical. I was surprised. When I came in, he treated me nicely; he gave me a bottle of Cognac. I said, what did I do? He said well, there is a woman who was a Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Defence, from Kwara State, that I was investigating her. There was a petition against her that she bought a house in Asokoro for N800 million in the name of her eight years or ten years son. So, Odekunle told me that ah, Obla, you have to be careful ooo, that woman, I taught her when I was a lecturer in Ahmadu Bello University, she is very powerful, she is well connected and it was rumored at that time that she was dating one big man who was head of state, so you have to be careful and that her husband was a Defence Minister under Obasanjo from Kano. So, he told me look, go and drop that investigation. I told him Sir, I can't drop that investigation like that, people petitioned her to my office and if I do, they will say that I have been compromised. I told him that I have requested for her assets declaration form with the Code of Conduct, let me see if she declared that property. So, I left. After about five days I got the assets form of that woman that she had not declared that property. One week thereafter, I was removed. I was suspended.

Was that how the case ended?

All the cases I was investigating, including the \$7 billion that Soludo gave to banks in 2006 when banks were asked to recapitalize. They gave them that money and it was not a dash. It was just a bailout which they were supposed to return just like people returning monies that Buhari gave as bailout. The Central Bank Board under Dr Shamsuddeen Usman, they met and wrote off that money. I said ah, how can you write off that money? It is not a dash. It is Nigerian money. Who gave you? Who gave the Central Bank Board the audacity or the authority? That was one of the cases I was investigating. So, when I left, they first asked Malami to take over all those cases and all the things I had recovered. Even the one about the guy in Jabi that I sealed up his warehouse with a lot of vehicles, all those things were released to all of them after I left and some of the cases were dropped. They never investigated the matters again.

In terms of naira and kobo, how much was your committee able to recover for government?

Ah! We did a lot ooo.

Just give us a summary. Was it N10 billion? Was it N5 billion?

It was more than that. For instance, one of the parastatals

that I was directed to investigate and recover money for, Nigeria Export Bank, you know it is a Federal Government parastatal, an agency of government that supports people who are into import and export. The bank was almost bankrupt at that time because a lot of politicians had collected money, even those who were not into export and import business. They collected money and they were unable to pay back. So, we were investigating. I recovered over N10 billion for that bank.

When all these travails started to rear their heads and your friend, Malami, was in the vanguard of all these, didn't you think that it was corruption fighting back?

Definitely! My wife went to see Malami because we had known ourselves. My wife is a lawyer and when we were in the CPC (the defunct Congress for Progressive Change), I was among the lawyers, including Malami and my wife, who went to court on behalf of CPC to nullify Jonathan's election. So, he knows my wife very well. My wife was not around when all these things happened. When she came back, she said ah, Malami is your friend, let me go and see Malami. She invited one of her friends, Chidi Nwanu, he is a lawyer based in Lagos, who was also in our legal team. And they went to see Malami to say ah, what is this? What are you doing to your friend? Malami told my wife that; didn't I know that it is their government? That he is the most powerful figure in government? He said I am not a team player and said all what not about me. So, that was it. Initially, I thought it was even the vice president, but later I discovered it was Malami who masterminded everything against me because he was never comfortable. It is a long story. He was never comfortable with me because they were the ones – himself, El-Rufai, Rotimi Amaechi and Yahaya Bello, who went to (Yemi) Osinbajo when Osinbajo was Acting President and said look, the war against corruption was not going on well, ICPC is very quiet, it is inactive, let's bring in Obla as Acting Chairman of ICPC because he is from the same zone, from the South-South and he is from Cross River. Nta Ekpo was the chairman and he is from Akwa Ibom. They said okay, since we are from the same area, I should replace him. And Rotimi Amaechi called me and told me that this is what is going to happen. After about two weeks, Osinbajo invited me and said look, we would have sent you to ICPC, but the Senate will fight you. So, you will go to the panel and this is an enlarged effort against corruption and so forth and so on. Then, they said Malami was supposed to give me some documents about some high profile cases. Malami never gave me any file.

Did you approach him?

I approached him. There was a day I went to Rotimi Amaechi. I told him, I said look, this thing is not working ooo. So, Rotimi told me to 'come and enter my car.' We drove from his house in Asokoro to Gwarimpa where Malami was staying. We didn't meet Malami. He had left

for his office. So, we came back to the Ministry of Justice headquarters. Two of us, and before him and I, he agreed that I should meet his PA, that his PA will give me all the records. Of course, it took me six months.

You mean to get the records?

Yes. So, one day, I went to the PA's office and said look, you are insulting me. You are a lawyer; I am a senior lawyer, why are you treating me this way? He said Mr Obla, don't be angry, come tomorrow and I will give you the file. I came the next day, he gave me one file and when I opened the file, it was a CV of a police officer. And one day, Malami told me that I was too close to Amaechi, that don't I know that Amaechi and El-Rufai are fighting Buhari? So, I was just a victim of high wired politics.

This may be a bit difficult, but can you tell us how much Nigerians lost under Buhari, maybe through corruption?

I cannot ascertain, but I think corruption escalated. I don't think we succeeded in bringing down corruption. I have mentioned a lot of cases here, so I don't think we were able to even scratch corruption. We even deteriorated it because you can see what is happening, some people who were around him, Hadi Sirika and all that, what we are hearing of what they did. I had just mentioned even one instance of money recovered. So, if the international community has been saying that we have lost so much, maybe \$500 billion through corruption, I think we perhaps, have lost that amount of money during Buhari's years.

Since government is a continuum, most Nigerians had expected that President Bola Ahmed Tinubu would improve on where Buhari stopped. So, how do you rate the one year administration of Tinubu?

I think one year is too small to assess any regime. But it has been a very difficult, challenging period for Nigerians during the one year because the naira was drastically devalued; the withdrawal of petroleum subsidy – there is a lot of sufferings. I can feel it. I mean, at least, you can rate me as a member of the middle class of Nigeria, but I feel it too. So, I begin to imagine what the ordinary people in Nigeria are going through.

Tinubu is claiming that what he meant on ground is enormous. Since it was a transition from one APC government to another, does it mean that APC failed Nigerians?

I have mixed feelings about your question because what we said and why some of us were part of that movement to fight PDP, fight President Jonathan, what we were told, I just mentioned the issue of corruption, that was very attractive for somebody like me who is idealistic, that we were going to clean up the country because one of the

major problems with Nigeria is corruption. And corruption is not only among the elite, even the ordinary people because, for instance, when I lost that job and I went back to my community, some people were laughing at me that I didn't make money. Even some of my relations, one of my brothers, refused to talk to me. He said I didn't empower them. So, you can see how deep corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria. We said we were going to fight corruption, we didn't succeed. To that extent, you may say look, we failed. The issue of corruption has to be addressed because the problem of insecurity is also a by-product of corruption. I am a money laundering expert; I have a Masters in Money Laundering. My LLM was in money laundering. So, there is a correlation between money laundering, insecurity and banditry. And the government has not succeeded in fighting insecurity because of corruption. It is corruption that is fuelling insecurity.

Nigerians have tested 16 years of PDP and now, nine years of APC. From the look of things, it appears that before 2027, a new party will emerge. Will you support a new party that will take Nigeria to the Promised Land?

Well, this is democracy. We practice multi-party democracy. I think we need more political parties. That would bring about checks and balances, alternatives. Nigerians should have alternatives. So, we shouldn't have a party that is so big to the extent that smaller parties will be emasculated. We need plenty of parties and we need a party that can match the governing party so that Nigerians will have alternatives when they want to vote because it is all about competition. We should have alternative. If the APC is not doing well, there should be another party that should match APC and then, we go into an electoral contest. That is what I believe in. So, if there is an alternative, the governing party will sit up because now, a lot of people are being taken for granted. I wanted to go to the Senate, but it was not as if I wasn't good enough, my people wanted me, but the governor of my state didn't want me and he gave the ticket to the person he wanted. So, those kinds of things shouldn't be in a good democracy. But I would say that our democracy is still young, 25 years. I was just telling my friend this morning that this is the first time that we have experienced democracy for 25 years. It is a landmark, but that shows that Nigerian democracy is very young, there will be a lot of mistakes until when we come to maturity. It may not be now, it may be in 50 years, it may be in 75 years time, but democracy is a very difficult thing. You can recall what happened in America. After 325 years or thereabout, when (Donald) Trump was defeated, he didn't want to go. If that can happen in America, how much more in Nigeria where democracy is still very embryonic?

Culled from the Sun Nigeria