

Fire and the Ballot Revolution in Rivers State

By REUBEN ABATI

There is a fire and ballot revolution in Rivers state and the main victim that I can see for now in the burning fire is Nyesom Wike, former Governor of Rivers State, incumbent Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) who is on record has having boasted garrulously that if anybody, a politician from any other part of the country thinks that he or she can support Governor Sim Fubara, his successor, to take the political structure away from him, he, Wike would put fire in that person's state. Wike is also on record as having said that there is no politician in the country today that is bigger than him. Wike was so strong a week ago that when he was hosted by a group of Ijaws, supposedly Fubara's kinsmen, he even repeated his claim that he was effectively in charge of Rivers State. At that occasion, Seyi Makinde, Governor of Oyo State begged Wike not to bring fire to his own state. Heineken Lokpobiri, Minister of State for Petroleum publicly confessed that Wike is indeed the Godfather of Niger Delta politics. Wike may never have heard of Percy Shelley's Ozymandias. But what has happened in our reckoning on October 5, with the conduct of the local Government elections in Rivers State is better described as Wike's Ozymandias moment. It was a moment when Sim Fubara who was brought to power, by Wike as Wike and his allies claim, and who has suffered for so long in their hands decided that enough was enough and that Wike's dictatorial hold over Rivers State must end. On Saturday, October 5, Fubara the godson decided that it was time he became the father of the father, and produced his own sons. It was the moment he decided that his own Godfather must be beheaded, so that the son could become the man. He proved the point that Godfathers do not live forever, particularly in Nigerian politics, and that the answer to Godfatherism is

political patricide, given the circumstances.

It will be recalled that Minister Nyesom Wike has never hidden the fact that he made Sim Fubara Governor of Rivers State on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Fubara was indeed Wike's Chief Accountant (2020 – 2022). Wike decided that Fubara would be his preferred successor. So, he bought the form for his nomination. He told the people of Rivers State that Fubara would be their next Governor. He bankrolled the campaign so he claims. He has told us that he did everything possible to make Fubara the Governor. And that came to pass. And that was where the problem began. It was not enough that Wike had been rewarded with a Ministerial appointment by President Bola Tinubu of the rival, now ruling party, the All - Progressives Congress (APC) in compensation for Wike's treachery against his own party, the PDP, we were faced with a curious situation whereby Wike decided that he would remain in control of governance in Rivers State. He was shameless in defending the amphibian nature of his politics, a man who betrayed his party at the national level insisting that he would also hold on to how politics is played in his home state. His critics alleged that he chose all the political appointees in Fubara's administration with the exception of maybe one or two. Members of the House of Assembly were majorly Wike's men. Key commissioners in the administration treated the Governor shabbily because they reported directly to the Godfather in Abuja. Fubara's wife was



not even allowed to attend any event without Wike's approval. Fubara himself was under close watch. He was a captive in the position that he occupied a prisoner of the Godfather's goodwill. But there is a limit to which some people can be pushed to the wall. In May 2024, a frustrated, humiliated Governor Fubara felt compelled to speak up. He said "The Jungle Has Matured." What he meant then was that he was tired of the former Governor, wearing the toga of the Godfather riding roughshod over him, breathing down his neck. He threatened to

set up a panel of inquiry to investigate the past administration. He sacked or frustrated out of his government Wike's acolytes who spied on him and treated him as if he did not matter. He faced the House of Assembly members head-long and began to stare them down. His larynx suddenly opened up and he began to talk. He transformed from the timid Godson who begged for peace to the Godson who had developed fangs. He had the support of the elders and youths of the community who felt Wike should allow Fubara to have his turn as Governor. He wanted to suspend local government chairmen. He was told he could not do it. The people of Rivers had now become divided, pro-Wike, pro-Fubara, both parties threatening fire and brimstone. The majority stood by Fubara. In December 2023, Fubara sacked local government chairmen who served under Wike. He also removed the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers, another Wike ally. He threatened to demolish both the Rivers State House of Assembly and the state legislative quarters.

On October 5, 2024 the jungle had finally matured. It was the day when local council elections were held in 23 local councils of Rivers State. Before the election, Wike's loyalists in the PDP and the APC staged a protest on the streets. The PDP in Rivers State, the sitting Governor's own party even went ahead to boycott the elections. Boycott has never been a potent political weapon. It may raise questions of legitimacy after the fact but the election would have been won and lost. There were court cases, with the Rivers State High Court and the Federal High Court giving conflicting judgments. In the end, Governor Fubara insisted that the elections would proceed as scheduled on the strength of a July 11, 2024 Supreme Court ruling that only democratically elected persons could be Chairpersons of Local Councils in Nigeria, the Rivers High Court ruling, Section 197 of the 1999 Constitution which creates State Independent Electoral Commissions and Section 59 of the Rivers State Electoral Commission Law No. 2 of 2018. Pro-Wike objectors to the election relied on a Federal High Court ruling which ordered that even the Police must not provide security during the elections. There were skirmishes about the police carting away election materials and the Governor having to visit the headquarters of the RSIEC, as the state electoral body is known, to challenge the police. Nonetheless, the Governor insisted that the elections will take place.

And so it was, that on Saturday October 5, in 23 local governments, 6, 866 polling units in 319 wards in Rivers State, local government elections were conducted, superintended by Justice Adolphus Enebeli (rtd), and his staff at RSIEC, with 18 political parties out of 19, participating. The people of Rivers State turned out in large numbers. They defied the rain. And they voted in a process witnessed by journalists, observers, members of the Nigerian Bar Association and party agents. In the end, Justice Enebeli (rtd) declared the Action Peoples Party (APP), Fubara's proxy party, since his own PDP boycotted the elections having been hijacked by Wike, as winner in 22 LGAs and 314 councillorship positions. Etche Local Government where results had been suspended was finally declared for the Action Alliance. The remaining councillorship seats were

won by the APC (in Ward 3), the Social Democratic Party, the Boot Party and the Young People's Party (YPP). Without much ado, the newly elected Chairmen were quickly sworn in and given their certificates of return on Sunday, October 6 at a Government House ceremony where Governor Fubara proclaimed that desperate situations require desperate measures.

Truly, the situation in Rivers last Saturday was a desperate one. For me, the following are the quick takeaways. One, Fubara, the godson had become the father. This is in line with an aspect of the wisdom of Silenus which says that ultimately the son becomes the father in the process of Being-ness. Charles Kettering once said that "Every father should remember one day his son will follow his example, not his advice." Whatever advice Wike may have given Fubara, what we witnessed on Saturday in Rivers state was a case of Fubara following Wike's example. In 2016, one of the first things Wike did upon the assumption of office as Governor was to sack some of the Local Government Caretaker Committee



Chairmen appointed by Governor Rotimi Amaechi, his predecessor. Wike would soon elect his own Local council Chairmen. And he seized control of the political structure in Rivers State. He beheaded his own Godfather. The same destiny has now caught up with him. Nemesis. Hubris. What a man sows he reaps. Karma. What goes around comes around. Fubara is now the new Godfather in Rivers politics and he sounded so as he admonished the new local council Chairmen on Sunday to serve the people and not their stomachs.

Two, Wike had promised to put fire in other people's states should they interfere in the politics of Rivers State. The fire that he talked about has been lit in his own very backyard. Should he be allowed to put fire in Rivers State? The biggest fear in Rivers today is the fear of violence and the breakdown of law and order. On election day, there was violence in Ogunabali area of Port Harcourt where voters were attacked and election materials were destroyed. In Ward 19, Elekahia, policemen were said to have invaded the polling unit and obstructed the voting process. On Monday, that is yesterday, after the police announced that they had unsealed the local council secretariats, hoodlums attacked the local councils in Ikwerre, Emohua, Ahoada East and Eleme and set them on fire. Elsewhere, anti-Fubara groups tried to prevent the local