

POLITICS, INTEGRITY AND SHAME

You don't need to defame a political opponent in order to sell your choice candidate to the electorates. Be careful of what you say today because it may come back to haunt you in future

In one of my previous writings, I canvassed the need for Nigerians and public opinion leaders who choose to venture into the murky waters of politics to embrace and promote issue-based politics. My argument was anchored on the reality that political loyalties are often fluid; today's political ally may become tomorrow's opponent, and vice versa. Consequently, statements made in the heat of partisan battles can easily return to haunt those who uttered them. Unfortunately, many spokespersons for Nigerian politicians expend enormous energy attacking, vilifying, and defaming political opponents instead of using that same energy to articulate the vision, policies, and programmes of the candidates they represent. Rather than persuading the electorate with ideas and constructive debates, they often resort to personal attacks that eventually expose them to accusations of hypocrisy when political circumstances change. A classic example is Daniel Bwala. During the 2023 presidential election, while serving as one of the spokespersons for the presidential campaign of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Bwala made numerous scathing remarks about Bola Ahmed Tinubu, questioning both his competence and suitability for the presidency. However, when the election did not favour Atiku and Tinubu emerged victorious, Bwala wasted little time in switching allegiance to the very man he had vigorously opposed. Today, he serves as one of the spokespersons for the Tinubu administration, defending and promoting the same president he had previously argued was unqualified to lead Nigeria. A similar pattern can be observed in the political journey of Kenneth Okonkwo. During the 2023 presidential election, he was one of the prominent spokespersons for Peter Obi of the Labour Party. In that capacity, he repeatedly argued that Bola Ahmed Tinubu should never have appeared on the presidential ballot and consistently portrayed Atiku Abubakar as a politician with a propensity for corruption.

However, following the declaration of the election results by INEC, and after Peter Obi was not declared the winner, Kenneth Okonkwo gradually shifted his political allegiance to Atiku Abubakar. Critics have argued that this dramatic change was motivated more by personal political interests than by any genuine ideological conviction. What makes Kenneth Okonkwo's case particularly intriguing is not merely his decision to change political camps, but the speed and extent of his transformation. Having once defended Peter Obi with remarkable enthusiasm, he later turned his attention to criticizing the same Obi while

simultaneously presenting Atiku Abubakar as the most suitable presidential hopeful for Nigeria. Ironically, this was the same Atiku Abubakar whom Kenneth Okonkwo had earlier accused of possessing a propensity for corruption. Even after both politicians became associated with the African Democratic Congress (ADC), Kenneth publicly criticized Atiku's reported choice of Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi as his preferred running mate. At the time, Kenneth maintained that he would only support a presidential candidate who selected a running mate from the South-East geopolitical zone. He therefore declared that he could no longer support Atiku's presidential ambition. Yet, political developments appear to have taken another dramatic turn. Following his appointment as one of Atiku Abubakar's spokespersons for the 2027 presidential campaign, Kenneth Okonkwo appears to have reconsidered his earlier position. This sudden reversal has inevitably raised questions about consistency, conviction, and political credibility.

Although some may wish to place Kenneth Okonkwo in the same category as Daniel Bwala and Reno Omokri, individuals who fiercely opposed Bola Tinubu in 2023 before later adopting different political positions, Kenneth's situation appears, in the eyes of many observers, to stand apart. His critics contend that his public interventions increasingly reflect personal political calculations rather than steadfast adherence to principle. Many Nigerians are therefore watching with keen interest to see how he will convincingly market the presidential ambition of the same Atiku Abubakar whom he once portrayed as having a propensity for corruption. The challenge before him is not merely political; it is also one of credibility. Reconciling his previous public pronouncements with his present responsibilities will require explanations that many Nigerians will undoubtedly scrutinize.

In the end, this episode reinforces the very argument for issue-based politics. When political actors focus more on personalities than on policies, they often become prisoners of their own words. Political alliances may change, but integrity, consistency, and credibility remain enduring currencies in public life. As Kenneth Okonkwo settles into his new role, Nigerians will undoubtedly continue to watch closely, eager to see how he navigates the contradictions between his past declarations and his present political assignment. Until then, there was indeed a country!