

Okonjo-Iweala: The making of a candidate

Contributed by Jonathan Elendu
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Nigeria's former Finance Minister and now External Affairs Minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is a woman who has garnered a lot of acclaim within local and international circles. She is credited, by her admirers and supporters, with turning Nigeria's economy around. Okonjo-Iweala is reputed to have entrenched discipline and transparency in Nigeria's economic system. Her critics believe she sold Nigeria and Nigerians to her foreign masters and unleashed unprecedented sufferings on Nigerians despite the huge receipts Nigeria has recorded in revenue.

Elendureports.com had a chat with some politicians and media personalities in Abuja recently. One of the politicians in the group asked: "How come at a time of unprecedented wealth Nigerians are so poor; the stable electricity promised us is completely broken down, our roads have constituted the worse death traps ever, threat to lives and property have never been so high?" But she cannot be blamed for all the country's ills, we interjected. "But she is being credited with this economic miracle that is really a mirage! In Nigeria things are not always what they seem. Find out the main reason behind the much celebrated debt relief" said one of the discussants. The issue of the debt relief granted Nigeria by the Paris Club last year is still being debated within and outside Nigeria by Nigerians and others in the international community. Elendureports.com investigations suggest that some Nigerians and indeed some people in the international community believe that Okonjo-Iweala was used by the international financial institutions to fleece Nigeria. In discussing with some politicians, diplomats and public affairs analysts, we found there is a school of thought that believes Nigeria was granted debt relief because the international lenders are not sure of Nigeria's continued existence as one unit. According to this group, international lenders wanted to cut their losses, get as much as they can and if the country collapses into different units, so be it. Some of the analysts we spoke to opined that Nigeria's ability to pay eighteen billion dollars in one year is a clear indication that Nigeria did not need debt relief and certainly did not deserve one. "Brazil owes more than Nigeria could ever owe and yet they continue to plough money into their development programs and see how far they have come. In our own case, we gave all the money away and saved the rest in their banks while our people have no jobs, no electricity, no good drinking water, no security and no hope for a better future. I agree with you Ngozi performed a Nigerian miracle. It is only a Nigerian miracle that could have produced a scenario where the richer you get the more impoverished you are." Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was quoted sometime ago as saying she was driven by anger as Finance Minister. "It is a sense of anger that drives me," she said. From all indications, it would appear that Okonjo-Iweala is still driven by anger. The June 21st redeployment to the Foreign Affairs ministry, we are told, has made Madam Minister very angry. Last week's statement by Secretary to the Federal Government, Uffot Ekaette, which suggested that Madam Minister may have sensationalized a story and probably lied about her "discovery" could not have made Okonjo-Iweala happy. Sources told us that her colleagues at the Federal Executive Council are not happy with the way she tried to impugn the reputation of her predecessor, Olu Adeniji. A serving Minister who spoke to Elendureports.com on the condition of anonymity said, "Nobody is happy with her…look at how she went after Adeniji, a perfect gentleman. Here is a man who carries himself with humility and within a few days she tries to destroy the man like that? It is most unfair, especially given that this is a matter under investigation." He told us that it was obvious that Okonjo-Iweala was trying to suggest that she was redeployed to the Foreign Affairs Ministry because the former minister, Olu Adeniji was incompetent. "And this is not true…some of us know why Adeniji was reassigned," he said. From all indications, Okonjo-Iweala's fight is not only with her predecessor. She is said to have verbally attacked her successor, Nenadi Usman. According to sources, Okonjo-Iweala's last meeting with her successor almost turned into a fist fight as she angrily told Nenadi Usman: "You are not qualified for this position. Obasanjo put you here so that he can steal money but you will not succeed. I will use all my international connections to see that you do not succeed on this job." A top government official who walked into the new Finance Minister's office is said to have found her in tears. A few days later, the Foreign Minister circulated information to the effect that a speech given by Nenadi Usman was by her during her tenure as Finance Minister. This, according to sources, is said to have hurt the new Minister.

Elendureports.com can reveal that contrary to denials of a political ambition by the Minister of External Affairs, she is indeed positioning herself for political office in 2007. In a recent interview with Thisday, Okonjo-Iweala said, "I don't know anything about any political group and I feel we should be left alone to do our job. I want to make it clear that I am about focusing on my work as I have always been." Our investigations indicate that the Minister is trying to position herself for a slot as a vice presidential candidate to a serious presidential candidate. The Foreign Affairs Minister has for sometime nursed the ambition of elective political office, according to sources close to her. In recent times she and her close associates have sponsored stories favorable to her in Nigerian newspapers. These include stories that have portrayed her as a suitable candidate for the office of President. To this end, journalists have been recruited to ensure that positive stories about her are constantly in the media. Last week Elendureports.com spoke with one of the journalists who suggested that he was not the only journalist in the Minister's payroll. "I cannot tell you how much I have been paid but I can assure you there are other journalists working for her," he told us.

Does this diminish Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's chances of elective office in 2007 or the future? "Absolutely not," replied a top politician. "It is only the naïve that expect somebody like Okonjo-Iweala to be apolitical after serving in a powerful office for four years. No doubt she is a highly qualified and patriotic Nigerian. You can't

take that away from her, whether you like her or not.”

Email: jonathan@elendureports.com