

Who Is Using EFCC to Hunt Amaechi?

Contributed by Jonathan Elendu
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On Thursday, October 2, 2008, two newspapers, the Vanguard and the Nigerian Tribune declared that some accounts belonging to the Rivers State Government were frozen. They also declared that a top member of the Rivers State Government may have been on the run from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). As the week progressed other newspapers in Nigeria carried the story.

The Vanguard story claimed that the official opened a bank account in his name and later converted it to a government account after he took a top level government appointment. The very popular internet magazine, Saharareporters.com gave the name of the top government official as Nyeso Wike, the chief of staff to the Rivers State Governor, Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi. The story alleged that Wike's account held large sums of money and that "N50 million, N100 million, N200 million, N300 million were several times lodged into the account";

This reporter was already in Port Harcourt before the stories broke. We are shooting two television documentaries dealing with the state and its problems and progress. In the course of gathering information on the documentaries we came across this story and immediately commenced investigations. Elendureports.com sent a text message to Femi Babafemi, the EFCC spokesman to inquire if the agency froze any accounts of the Rivers State Government. Babafemi's response was, "Yes, pls." However, officials of the Rivers State Government insist that no account of the Rivers State Government was frozen by the EFCC.

Our investigations revealed that contrary to published reports, the Zenith Bank, which is the bank involved in this scandal does not have what it calls "institutional accounts" at the Azikiwe road branch in Port Harcourt. We also discovered that Nyeso Wike, the chief of staff to Gov. Amaechi operates a bank account with Zenith Bank, Plc. The bank account, according to documents in our possession, was opened in 2004 and is still active to date.

While it has been speculated in the media that Nyeso Wike withdrew a huge amount of money from his bank account at Zenith Bank on September 5, 2008, and took to his heels, we can reveal that Wike's account at Zenith Bank had exactly N4, 626, 238.63. That same day check no. 317 was used to withdraw the sum of N4,000,000.00 from the account leaving a balance of N626, 238. 63. That was the only withdrawal made on that day. Account no: 6025004949 remains Nyeso Wike's private account.

Elendureports.com investigated account no. 601-091-6587. Our investigations show that that the Rivers State Government opened that account in 2004. This reporter sighted bank statements of this account, specifically between the months of January and March, 2008. Wike and Amaechi came into office the same day: October 26, 2007.

How was Wike able to convert his personal bank account to a government account? We put this question to Nyeso Wike in his office at the Rivers State Government House on Friday, October 3, 2008. "It is only on the pages of Nigerian newspapers and the internet that such things happen," he said. "Why would I convert my personal account to government account when I'm not a signatory to any government accounts? You journalists exhibit a lot of ignorance. Political appointees do not sign checks. So, why would I give up my bank account for the government?"

We spoke to a few bankers from different banks. They were unanimous in their assertion that it is not possible to convert a personal account to a government account or vice versa. "You cannot even convert your own bank account to your son's name or even your wife who may be named as the next of kin," said a top banker at the United Bank for Africa (UBA).

This writer tried to pay money into the account of Harrison Ba Princewill at one Zenith Bank branch while another member of the Elendureports.com team tried to do the same at another branch of the bank. The idea was to prove that Harrison Ba Princewill operates or had an account with Zenith Bank. After filling the deposit teller, I handed it to a cashier at the customer service desk. She stamped and told me it would be posted later that day. I insisted on the money being posted to the account immediately. The cashier tried a few times to "post" the money to the account. After about 5 minutes she told me that no such accounts existed in Zenith Bank.

Several Zenith Bank officials who spoke to this reporter under conditions of anonymity insisted that no Rivers State Government accounts in Zenith Bank had been frozen. "We are yet to get a letter or Court Order from the EFCC directing us to close any Rivers State Government accounts. In any case even if they brought a letter to us we would not carry out the instructions until a court has given such an order but as I speak to you now there is even no letter to that effect," the official said.

Another official of Zenith Bank speaking under conditions of anonymity said, "I won't lie to you that this bank and some people at the top had done some serious things in the past but it's not happening now. You guys

chose the wrong time and wrong client to chase. Sorry.”

Who is using the EFCC to fight Gov. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi? “I don’t know. What I do know is that there are several powerful interests who insist on distracting us. I tell you this is a mere distraction but it will not deter us from doing what we came here to do for Rivers people,” said Nyeso Wike. He also informed us that he would report to the EFCC offices on Monday, 6th October, 2008. “My friend, ask yourself, how come none of the reports in the newspapers have quoted a court document freezing Rivers State Government accounts? You journalist should be more careful so that you don’t become willing tools in the hands of very powerful people. This is not good for our nascent democracy.”

Our investigations revealed that some serving members of the Federal Government and former Rivers State/Federal Government officials may have made this move against the Amaechi government. We also came upon information that Cabinet change by Pres. Yar’Adua may have played a role here. This reporter was reliably informed that a member of Yar’Adua’s Cabinet fears that he may be replaced by somebody close to Gov. Amaechi and therefore embarked on this preemptive strike. Elendureports.com would not reveal the name of the official for now.

For purposes of full disclosure, this reporter is producing 2 television documentaries on the Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi government. We are yet to be commissioned or paid for this work. However, we have interviewed many members of the Amaechi administration. This reporter also produced and directed a television documentary soon after Peter Odili was elected the governor of Rivers State in 1999.

Email: jonathan@elendureports.com