

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY DIM CHUKWUEMEKA ODUMEGWU-
OJUKWU, CHIEF GUEST OF HONOR AT THE PROFESSOR CHINUA
ACHEBE INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON FREE AND FAIR
ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA.

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TITLE:

NDIGBO SHALL REGAIN POLITICAL RELEVANCE IN NIGERIA, IN MY
LIFETIME

Our host; the very distinguished; our own beloved and revered Professor Chinua Achebe, I salute you.

Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to begin this address by greeting everyone who has made time to attend this very important Colloquium. May the Almighty God, the God of the universe, the Omnipotent and Omniscient God, the creator of all peoples of the earth, the creator of Nigerians, the creator of Ndigbo, bless you.

My primary duty today is to welcome you to this conference being hosted by one of the very best that the creator has given to the world from the Igbo stock, a citizen of the world but who is proud to be Igbo; our very own Chinua, Chinualumogu Achebe, we your people love you.

We salute you today as we did over fifty years ago when you told our story in "Things Fall Apart". It became the mother of all firsts in African Literature. We salute you today because you continue to make us proud through your values and ideals; and your commitment and courage in standing up for what is right and just in society. We hold that these are true hallmarks of Ndigbo, Nigerians and indeed all sane human beings. We jubilated and today we thank you for spurning the "national honour" to be given to you by then President Obasanjo at the height of impunity and abuse of the Anambra State Government and people. By that action of yours whatever pride was being trampled upon by the powers that be at the time was retrieved by your courage. Ndi Anambra salute you. Thank you. Ndigbo and well-meaning Nigerians salute you for standing tall at the time. More importantly the Igbo soul yearns for more Chinua Achebes, clear thinkers, lucid writers, men of courage, crusaders against injustice, true sons and daughters of their

fathers. Today I say to you, dear Chinua that you are a true son of Ogidi, Anambra, Ndigbo, Nigeria and the world. As you wrote more than fifty years ago, "the body of Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu" on behalf of Ndigbo salutes you. Deme, Deme-Deme.

The founding fathers of Nigeria won for us after a bitter struggle with our colonial masters the right to be governed by leaders of OUR OWN CHOICE. Today we must apologize to our founding fathers for our inadequacies, for our lack of courage, indeed for our cowardice which made it possible for us to lose this right to be governed by leaders of our own choice via massive electoral malpractices. This situation just cannot continue. We as Nigerians must resolve today, not tomorrow, to conduct free, fair and credible elections. We cannot afford to fail in this all-important task. And we shall not fail. For it is true that no violence, indeed nothing can stop a people once they have decided to win back their rights. Therefore I say to this Colloquium today that our collective future in Nigeria as One nation under God, lies in our collective resolve to organize free, fair and credible elections.

Let this, our resolve, be impregnable. Let us face the matter of free and fair elections in Nigeria with the same fervor and courage as our founding fathers faced the struggle for Nigeria's independence, it is that serious; for the future and well-being of our nation depends on this. As we seek to accomplish this mission, we must, as a people, be determined to deal ruthlessly with any who obstruct the genuine will of the people. Such people who benefit from electoral malpractices and the political instability which follow in their wake, must be decisively and summarily dealt with. In the words of Pandit Nehru, the late Prime Minister of India, "a moment comes but rarely in history when we step out of the old, into the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed, finds expression." The struggle for free and fair elections in Nigeria, which I prescribe at this colloquium today, cannot be avoided. It should be regarded as an irreversible mission of national retrieval and rejuvenation. It shall be the last struggle of true and genuine Nigerian patriots to save the fatherland and propel it to greater heights.

Let me warn that throughout history, struggles have never been for the fainthearted. As we know, struggle by its very nature entails suffering and sacrifice. However, we also know that suffering breeds character, and character breeds faith, and in the end faith always prevails. Consequently, we shall embark on this mission to exorcise Nigerian politics of the demons of electoral malpractices, which have stood before Nigeria and greatness, knowing that our future as a nation depends on it. It will not be easy. But it has to be won in the Anambra State Governorship elections on February 6th, 2010, and in the nation-wide general elections in 2011. God being our strength, and with aggressive vigilance of citizens in "community policing" of

their votes/mandate, we shall achieve the objective of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

I wish to continue this address by affirming my personal resolve and commitment that Ndigbo shall regain political relevance in Nigeria, in my lifetime, I am a Nigerian. But I am also an Igbo. It is my being Igbo that guarantees my Nigerian-ness as long as I live. Consequently, my Nigerian-ness shall not be at the expense of my Igbo-ness. The Nigerian nation must therefore work for all ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. This is the challenge, the key part of which is nationwide free and fair elections.

Back to Ndigbo. They are the most peripatetic ethnic group in Nigeria. In the words of another great writer, Professor Emmanuel Obiechina, who is well-known to our host, "Ndigbo forgot that they also had a farm of their own to tend and spent their youth and vigor working on other people's farms whilst their own was overgrown with weeds." Now, the weeds have taken over and Ndigbo must engage in two struggles simultaneously - to rid their own farms of weeds while insisting on free and fair elections throughout Nigeria. It is like jumping over two hurdles, vertically stacked.

Compounding the Igbo predicament are the after-effects of their post civil war political and economic emasculation by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Their shrill cries of marginalization were ignored by others and by the Nigerian Government and they have come to terms with the reality of their present position in Nigeria. But we Ndigbo will never give up. It is not in our character to succumb to inequity. Being a very major ethnic group in Nigeria, we will not accept our present marginalized status as permanent and we shall continue to seek and struggle for justice, fairness and equity in the Nigerian politics.

My commitment, because I am seriously involved, is to work with all well-meaning Nigerians to bring about the Nigerian society as promised by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. When this happens, and all glass ceilings and other unwholesome practices designed to keep Ndigbo, or any other ethnic groups in Nigeria marginalized are dismantled, I shall feel fulfilled. When this happens, Ndigbo shall regain their political and economic relevance in a fair, just and egalitarian Nigerian society. This remains my mission. It is my commitment to Ndigbo. It is my commitment to Nigeria, Africa and the world. And it shall happen in my lifetime. Not after. This is both my desire and a promise. I therefore urge this generation of Ndigbo, especially the youths, to gird their loins to safeguard their votes in the coming elections as to elect leaders of our choice. We shall either achieve this in the February 6th, 2010 Anambra State Governorship elections and 2011 General elections in Nigeria or forever hang our heads in

shame as a failed generation. Let us not be intimidated by coercive forces of Government. The mandate belongs to us collectively, and not to government. As for me, I cannot be intimidated, and I know that together we shall triumph.

Let me hasten to add that some of the glass ceilings have begun to disappear with some recent appointments by the Federal Government of Nigeria. This gives me hope that previous watertight exclusion of Ndigbo from key national positions is being positively addressed. One hopes that these positive developments shall be sustained as we continue to sustain the Government that follows.

However, over and above these tokens of de-marginalization, is the central and fundamental issue of electoral reform and the eradication of electoral malpractices in the Nigerian system. This is at the root of continued marginalization of various groups in Nigeria. For example, it is no secret that Governorship aspirants of the few Igbo State in Nigeria (the Igbo geopolitical zone has fewer states than the other geopolitical zones) strive to be endorsed from outside Igboland. When such a Governorship aspirant gets "elected", "imposed" or "appointed" as Governor of an Igbo State, he remains loyal and accountable not to the electorate in Igboland, but to the godfathers outside Igboland that endorsed, "imposed" or "appointed" them.

This modern-day enslavement of Igbo politics must end. And I worry as I see the same scenario about to be re-enacted with the February 6th, 2010 Anambra State Governorship elections. And I say, God forbid. Chukwu ekwena. Already, there are invasions of Anambra State by political heavyweights from outside of the State seeking to foist their preferred "Governors" on Ndi Anambra. Before then, there was an attempt to politically castrate the political organization - the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) which I lead and which currently enjoys the mandate of the people of Anambra State. That attempt failed. And the incumbent Governor remains the APGA candidate for the February 6th, 2010 Anambra State Governorship Elections. Let me assure all gathered here, and the entire people of Nigeria, that I shall be physically out there in the field to ensure that the mandate of Ndi Anambra is not stolen again. We shall meet the invaders in the field.

A curious observer may ask, "Why Anambra?" The answer is there - Anambra State was chosen in the best-forgotten days of "garrison politics" in Nigeria as the entry point for the emasculation and enslavement of Igbo politics. But like Horatio, APGA stands firm at the gate, refusing to yield. In case we have forgotten, Anambra State was the only state in Nigeria where an incumbent Governor was denied a chance to seek re-election by his political party, in 2003. In case we have also forgotten, Anambra State was where the political party which I lead, the

APGA, won elections in 2003 but the elected Governor was not allowed to exercise the mandate freely given by the people because of scandalous electoral fraud that became a national shame. The courts declared APGA as the winner of the election - the legal process taking the better part of three years. Also, it is only in Anambra State where there have been five "Governors" - one elected Governor and others, in the same period. The other States in Nigeria have had one or at most two Governors. It is in Anambra State that no Governor has served two terms of office. And finally, lest we have forgotten, it was the crass impunity and political happenings in Anambra State that incensed our host, Professor Chinua Achebe, to reject publicly with an admonition, a national honour richly deserved by him, but coming from a Presidential hand that was heavily soiled in the Anambra political mess.

Consequently, my firm resolve this time, with the political party to which I belong (i.e. the APGA), is to undertake a state-wide, grassroots community-based campaign and mobilization of Ndi Anambra against electoral malpractices in the February 6th Governorship elections. We insist that the votes of the people must count. We insist that the votes shall be counted, recorded and announced at the various polling centers throughout Anambra State. The people must elect a Governor of their choice. Ndi Anambra shall not be dictated to from outside - not from Abia, nor from any other geopolitical zone. Ndi Anambra will not succumb to intimidation. The invading forces of politicians must retreat from Anambra State. The state has bled enough. The hemorrhage must stop. Let the February 6th 2010 Anambra State Governorship elections be canvassed by Anambra people, for the people, so that families and communities shall see the faces of traitors and saboteurs among their own. In the end, let the TRUE WINNER of the elections govern. My party, APGA, and I will always respect the will of the people. That is what gives meaning to my life. When this happens, that is, when the people of Anambra State effectively resist electoral fraud and ensure that the choice of the people emerges as Governor, I will retire. As I retire, I expect that other Igbo States and the Nigerian nation will do what has to be done to exorcise the demons of electoral malpractices from the 2011 general elections in the country to ensure that these also become free and fair.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for listening. I thank our host, Professor Chinua Achebe, who in his work titled "The Trouble with Nigeria" diagnosed our national malaise as the absence of effective leadership, for showing effective leadership by convening this conference. May God bless him and his family. May God bless Ndigbo. May God bless Nigeria.