

## WHO BELIEVES IN OKOTIE'S CHANGE?

By Christine Ejealor

Seldom do dreamers benefit directly for their own visions. Every so often, they end up as pathfinders or harbingers of change.

In America, a black man, Barack Obama would never have ascended the Presidency of the United States if the bold, pioneering works of civil rights heroes like Rev Martin Luther King Jr and his followers in the Black consciousness movement of the '50s through '60s had not promoted the ideals of equality of all races and the rights of all Americans.

I HAD A DREAM, the famous speech of the great civil rights leader, Dr. King Jr in particular, became a prophecy fulfilled when Obama became President, in a predominantly white country where racism is a pandemic disease.

The thing about great ideas or revolutionary concepts that change the world is that, they usually start in the mind of someone, sometimes the least likely person. Who could have thought that a young, unemployed chap, who protested his joblessness by setting himself on fire, could have triggered the mass protests that toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt? Such isolated exercise in self-immolation by an unknown youth has launched a rampaging "People Power Revolution" in the Arab World, which is threatening to sack long-term dictators even in Libya, Yemen and the feudal monarchies of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Totalitarian regimes elsewhere in Africa have taken note, and are now trying to carry out hastily packaged reforms. All of this is sourced in the decision of a young man.

For sure, nothing can stop an idea whose time has come. Since 2003, when a young gospel preacher, Rev Chris Okotie joined the race for Nigeria's Presidency, he created ripples across the country. Before him, the farthest a cleric had gone in politics was the governorship elections won by Catholic Priest, late Rev Fr. George Adasu of Benue State in an earlier dispensation and Taraba State's two-time governor, Rev Jolly Tanko Nyame under the Obasanjo led PDP government.

A shot at the presidency was the boldest and most audacious step ever taken by a gospel preacher, and that created a lot of trouble for the adventurous Okotie, whose claim to fame hitherto was music stardom, and a lively but controversial career on the pulpit. Though respected for the depth of his teachings, he clearly

was a political light weight whom the mainstream politicians never saw as a serious threat, despite the breathtaking eloquence of his presentations.

But all of that has changed. The reverend began with a loud campaign for Generational change in 2003, saying the old politicians who had held sway since the early days of the military-civilian game of musical chairs, ought to give way for fresh men with progressive ideas to move Nigeria forward.

That message didn't seem to sink into the nation's consciousness then. Just a few years down the line, young, 'brand new' politicians have stepped out for the big job-Presidency. Without anyone admitting it, Okotie's "generational change" campaign has yielded fruit. New politicians with new mindset, a new campaign culture and attitude are gradually emerging on the political space.

In 2007, Okotie launched his party, Fresh Democratic Party, FRESH, the first by a new kid on the block, so to speak. His message was pure and simple: It's time for a new beginning. That seems to be a new thinking that the unsuspecting world embraced as unprecedented changes began to occur worldwide. America has elected its first black President; China and Russia have opened up and replaced their tired, old communist leadership with their jaded concepts of governance.

A truly millennium-complaint world is emerging with a new beginning on every front. If it seems to be a mere coincidence that Okotie's unconventional ideas often seem to catch public fancy almost without notice, we must give it to him that he is a young man with a wise head. Okotie's FRESH philosophy is anchored on Human Capital development, a key component of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals.

In a recent interview with the PUNCH, Okotie explained his party's programme extensively thus; when asked what vision he has for Nigeria in his latest shot at the presidency:

"I believe that the time has come for us to motivate the development of our people to the level of strategy and therefore we must concentrate on human capital development. That is the key to Nigerian growth because we must shift emphasis from things to people. If investments that have been made in the oil sector have been put into the lives of the Nigerian people, I believe that you would see a quantum leap.

“But because the government of the day is not interested in the Nigerian people, they have these development programmes that are mere attractions without any meaning to the lives of the people. We will concentrate on the Nigerian-people that is why in our slogan, “the people come first”. Education is vital. We must redesign the curriculum and build new schools, train teachers and motivate our students”. “There is a suggestion that the National Youth service Corps scheme should be used as a finishing school because of the deplorable state of the higher institutions. The people that are enlightened can become economically viable. The hospitals are just mortuaries. The whole structure is moribund, it must be addressed”.

“The transport, housing, pension scheme would be revamped. We shall focus on things that will enhance the lives of the people within the short term because the power issue is vital. But it is a long-term projection. We are not going to be involved in carrying out so many programmes at once so as not to make the mistake of late President Umaru Yar’Adua, who went into multiple tangent syndrome. We will concentrate on things of immediate needs before addressing the long-term projects.”

Okotie’s measured step to development puts him in the same boat with another outspoken trail blazer, Central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi. During his Senate confirmation, upon his nomination by the late President Usman Musa Yar’Adua, Sanusi shocked the PDP-dominated Senate, and embarrassed Yar’Adua when he boldly declared that, instead of a 7-point Agenda, the federal government should have taken it one after the other, like facing just one or two programmes, and make a success of them before venturing on the others.

From all indications, the Pastor-Politician may not have enough resources to sell his noble programmes down to the grassroots, but if he can persist, like all great revolutionaries who know how painfully slow people respond to change, then an Okotie Presidency may be knocking at our door.

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