Breakfast With The Soludos

By

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I had breakfast Tuesday, March 18, last week, with Governor Chukwuma Charles Soludo, CFR of Anambra state and his wife. I had travelled to the state, on the invitation of the Governor and his team to moderate a media chat on the occasion of his third year in office. He assumed office in March 2022. Three years later, the Governor thought it fit to give an account to the people who elected him. It was not difficult for me to accept the invitation. Three years earlier I had co-anchored the Anambra Gubernatorial Debate, in which Professor Soludo was a participant, organized by Arise News. In previous Anambra elections before that, I was also co-anchor of the Gubernatorial debates and I had been in and out of Anambra for various other programmes, including Kwechiri, over the years. In a word, I could claim some familiarity with Anambra politics and the key actors. The media chat proper took place on Tuesday evening, 7 – 9 pm and was broadcast live on Arise News, Channels TV, Television Continental (TVC) and Anambra State Television Service. I will come to that later, but after the Tuesday event, the Governor had other engagements, the National Working Committee (NWC) of his party, the All Progressives Congress Alliance (APGA) was visiting, and in-between attending to the cast and crew of the media broadcast, the Governor needed to attend to his party members who arrived while we were still with the Governor. He asked us: the four journalists who interviewed him – Babajide Otitoju of TVC, Maupe Ogun-Yusuf of Channels TV, Chris Molokwu of Anambra State TV (ABS TV), and my good self to join him for breakfast the following morning before leaving Awka, the state capital. My wife, Kikelomo Atanda-Owo, herself a journalist – RealTalkwithKike on Silverbird TV and Inspiration FM was with me.

By 9 am the following morning, we were at the Government House, a seemingly make-shift, modest, old building put up 34 years ago, meant originally for the Chief Judge of Anambra State but which ended up as the residence of the Chief Executive over the years. We were ushered to the dining room where the Governor and his wife, Mrs Nonye Soludo were waiting to receive us. The man from Anambra TV could not make it, but there we were- this writer, my wife, Otitoju and Maupe. The Governor ushered us to start eating immediately, giving us plates and his wife directing the kitchen staff who had shown up to make us as comfortable as possible. When it was the turn of the Governor to fill his own plate, the conversation in the room took a different turn. He turned to his wife:

“Madam, please you have to allow me this morning to eat as I like. I have a long day today in Okpoko. I need a lot of energy. I need permission to eat both what is right and what you do not approve of. Please, this oat is made of what? I want to eat well.” I was surprised that a whole Governor, a Professor of Economics, former Central Bank Governor, CFR would have to take permission from his wife to choose what to eat. The Governor was apparently reading my mind.

“Ah, Reuben that is what I go through oh. My wife is an expert in healthy living. She is always preaching that I must watch what I eat. But today I have work to do. When we buy food in this house, the first thing my wife will do is to start reading the label to find out what is in the food or not. Me, I don’t have time to read labels. But my wife is busy with this healthy living thing. She insists that you are what you eat.”

Every other person had filled their plates and taken their seats. The Governor invited us to take tea or coffee.

“You see”, he continued, “what I do in this house is that when Madam and the children are not watching, I go to the kitchen and I eat what I like. One of my daughters knows my habit. Once she goes into the kitchen, she would say I can see that Daddy is back. Where is he? Somehow, I always leave clues behind and my wife has trained her children so well, that they too have bought into this healthy living thing.”

This led to a discussion around the table between Mrs Soludo and the two women.

“You have to let the children know what is healthy and what is not healthy very early and they will just grow with it. Most diseases are caused by lifestyle. Problems such as hypertension, diabetes and many of those other ailments – kidney, liver diseases- they are caused by lifestyle. They are caused by what we eat and our ignorance. That is why I have a programme to encourage Anambra women to farm, have a garden, you can plant certain things that you eat in your household and you will know that it is not something that has been processed. I give out seedlings to encourage our women to farm.” Mrs Soludo and the women spent considerable time discussing what is healthy and what is not, while the Governor, Otitoju and I ate. At a point, Mrs Soludo excused herself and came back with sachets containing seedlings which she handed over to us.

“These are the seedlings I give out. They are very easy to plant. You can even plant them in a bucket and you will be surprised how they will flower and flourish. Basic things like this, when you have them, you can reduce the number of items you go to the market to buy” Each one of us got at least two packs containing okro, carrot, lettuce, tomato, sweet tomatoes, bitter leaf and onions.

“You’d be surprised how quickly these seedlings grow. You can plant them in a container. Or create a small garden in your home. You need sand. Humus soil. And all you need to do is to water them in the morning and in the evening. You will also need manure. I don’t recommend cow dung. It is smelly and it can attract pests that can damage the crops. I prefer poultry manure. Before you know it, if you want to prepare soup for your family, you will just go to your garden and harvest what you need.”

“Do you know why we did not have hunger riots in Anambra?”, the Governor interjected. “It was through this my wife’s programme about the need for everyone to plant something. The logic of it is simple: you won’t have to buy what you have in your garden. That automatically reduces the amount of household spend on feeding. The people selling the same item in the market will be forced to cut prices. I have always talked about Human Capital Development but I didn’t realize the impact of what we were doing until I went to attend an end of the year event by the Civil Service Union. I gave my speech and then I just jokingly said since it was Christmas, I was expecting gifts oh. It was a joke. But then I saw one woman coming towards me. When she spoke to me, I had to give her the microphone so that everybody could hear what she was saying. She was a widower. She said she had been looking for an opportunity to meet me to give me a gift, and that when she heard that I was coming to the Civil service event, she decided to come there. She introduced herself as a cleaner and said she runs a small poultry. She had decided to come and give me a fowl from her poultry to appreciate what I have been doing. I was close to tears. I looked at the woman. How much could she possibly be earning and yet she thought she should give her Governor a fowl for Christmas? I was close to tears. Yet another woman came and brought fruits for her Governor. This is what I find exciting about this job. When I leave here, I am going straight to Okpoko. The people are excited because they say I have transformed their community. There is a place in Onitsha that used to be a refuse dump, very smelly. We have changed all that too. You can make the people’s life better by supporting them.”

I was listening and also doing justice to my plate of boiled plantain and cup of black coffee. The women were still on their thing about healthy living and gardening. I overheard Maupe saying she already has a small garden in her home and she felt inspired by Mrs. Soludo’s encouragement. Kike told her she would start gardening as soon as she returned to Lagos. She has since planted all the seedlings and now goes about saying she is a gardener. What I hear now are lectures about healthy lifestyle and gardening and what Mrs. Soludo advised. I pray I do not end up in Governor Soludo’s trap of having to study food packs and ask Madam for clarifications about what should be eaten and what should be avoided in the name of healthy living! Many of us in Africa actually believe that something must kill a man, whether you eat healthy or not. Mrs. Soludo believes that you don’t have to kill yourself with what goes into your stomach. Hmm.

I was not in Anambra, however, to eat. I was there in my line of duty as a journalist. Before the interview on Tuesday, we had visited a place called The Solution Fun City – a sprawling, multi-purpose entertainment centre sitting on 27 acres of land in the heart of Awka. The builders said the Governor has given them a deadline of month-end, and that they will deliver. The place looks like another version of Disneyland. It has a Country Club for the elite. Behind this is a Games village for parents and their children: three cinemas, games rooms where I saw some of the best that is available elsewhere, and then swimming pools, a roller coaster, and playgrounds. The equipment were already in place to be fixed before the end of March. By the side is a CAF-compliant stadium for football. I had to ask our tour guide: “If Anambra children start coming to this place, when will they have time to study and do their home-work? With what I am seeing here, some students will stay here from morning till night, having fun.” I brought up the question again with the Governor later in the day. His explanation was that he needed to provide a special meeting point for Anambra people at home and in diaspora such that when they come home, they will have a place, that is safe and comfortable where they can relax with friends and family. He wants Anambra to be a destination of choice. “And candidly it is by mixing everything properly that we can attract investments. This state has many billionaires. I want them to see that they can invest in their own state.” He also plans to build a new Awka City.

We also visited the new Government House that the Soludo administration is building. Wow. What a project! The sprawling complex houses the new government house, the state secretariat, governor’s lodge, Deputy Governor’s complex, a Presidential Lodge, State House Hospital, a 1,000-seater Banquet Hall, and a 1,000-seater Amphitheatre, and 28 other buildings. I had asked the Governor if he would risk putting up such a masterpiece for another Governor to come and occupy. The next Gubernatorial election in Anambra is in November 2025. He said he wasn’t thinking of who will occupy the Governor’s Lodge. He simply wanted to leave a legacy of a proper Government zone, similar to the Three Arms Zone in Abuja, something that Ndi Anambra can be proud of. For 34 years, Anambra has not had a proper Governor’s Lodge or an administrative zone. He would change that and what he has done is bold and impressive. Everywhere around Awka, I could not but notice major markers titled “The Solution is here”. Many years ago when Soludo was still Governor of the Central Bank, I recall writing a piece titled “The Soludo Solution”. In his career either as an economist, technocrat or politician, Governor Soludo has always talked about finding solutions to the people’s problems. His fiercest critics accuse him of arrogance, they claim that he thinks he alone knows the solution to every problem. In three years, despite the naysayers, there is clear evidence of what Soludo has been able to do in terms of infrastructure, education (Anambra leads in education, with the lowest out-of-school children rate in Nigeria – 2.9% according to UNESCO), there is free education for all public primary and secondary schools, pensions are being paid, salaries of civil servants too, potable water is now available in Anambra, three brand new cities are springing up, hospitals are being built. Soludo has emplaced a new security architecture, a technology-driven surveillance system.

I was hesitant about going to Anambra. I had asked the Chief Press Secretary, Christian Aburime, if they had an airport in Awka. The last time I was there, I had to get a flight to Asaba airport, from where, under heavy military security, we were piloted to Awka. This time around, I made it clear that we would need security. But trouble began at the Murtala Muhammed Airport. Air Peace on which we had been booked suddenly changed their mind. They would no longer fly to Awka on Monday, and we should postpone our travel till Tuesday. These Nigerian airlines decide when you must travel, they cancel flights at will, and they don’t even think they owe you an explanation! We had to go through United Nigeria Airline which was going to Asaba, not Awka that Monday morning. I was scared. I was even more scared when we got to Asaba and the CPS said he had come to receive us in his own car and one protocol vehicle. I looked around. No security escort! Christian Aburime told me not to worry and that Anambra is safe, and that whereas people in the hinterland may stay at home in the early hours, people still go about, even if they do not open their shops for business. Throughout the journey from Asaba to Awka, I kept looking right and left. We got to Awka in one piece, without any cause for alarm. We even went round the city, a different Awka from what it was when I first visited in the 1990s. On Tuesday, we returned through the Chinua Achebe Airport in Awka. They have an airport in Awka quite alright. But why name it after Achebe? A university would have been the right institution for Achebe’s memorial.