

The high cost of legislative mediocrity

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigeria is a perfect practice address for any legislator who understands how to utilize lawmaking as a tool for positive change. Unfortunately, the nation is saddled with so-called lawmakers who wake up only when there's something to be grabbed for themselves. The Nigerian Senate invented the Orwellian joke of calling its members "distinguished," even if they don't know the most rudimentary thing about lawmaking. By comparison, the House of Representatives is a model of modesty. It could easily have ordered that its members be called "wizards" or "extraordinary" or "outstanding". Instead, it settled for "honorable." It insists that each member, however disreputable, be adorned with the prefix of "Honorable".

Truth be told, too many members of the legislative arm of government are as greedy, corrupt and inept as their counterparts in executive offices.

Two factors count to mask the greed quotient of legislators. The first is their sheer number, which makes it harder to focus on their individual acts of corruption. The second is that the mass media are far less likely to dwell on the untoward activities of legislators. Such media softness has in turn fed public perception that wielders of executive power, not legislators, epitomize graft.

At both the state and federal levels, Nigerian legislators have distinguished

themselves, in the main, by their failure to rise to the challenge of passing laws that are designed to improve the lot of most Nigerians. In a society where injustices are embedded in the very social fabric, it is remarkable that our legislative chambers have chosen to shirk their responsibilities, or to go to sleep. Or it may well be a case that the legislative chambers are packed with incompetents who don't know their left from their right as far as public policy is concerned. But the legislatures are always quick to bark when their sense of entitlement is questioned.

Take Anambra, a state whose entire legislative line-up was chosen by Mr. Andy Uba, a former presidential aide. That body browbeat—blackmailed—Governor Peter Obi into buying a car for each of its members. Then, during a protracted dispute between it and the governor over this year's budget, the "honorable" members more than tripled their own budgetary allocation while threatening to slash every other sector.

Take Mrs. Patricia Ette, disgraced former Speaker of the House of Representatives, who went on a N620 million spending spree to refurbish two official residences and buy some official cars for her office. Once she was removed, the woman reportedly lost interest in the business of the House. Stripped of the pomp and pageantry of office, she turned her back

on her fellows. Her attendance has dipped.

How about her successor, the youthful and well educated Mr. Dimeji Bankole? He deserves to be credited with bringing about some atmospheric improvement in the conduct of the lower chamber. But it would be a stretch to suggest that he has deployed youthful vigor or intellectual discernment to the business of lawmaking. Yes, Speaker Bankole did inaugurate the probe of several sectors of national life. But it is, at the very least, an indictment of his leadership that the probe of the power sector quickly degenerated into a theatrical distraction, with more titillation than light.

Meanwhile, Bankole has acquired a reputation as a globetrotter. No doubt, he could make the case that an occupant of his office has a lot to learn from interacting with legislators from a variety of countries. But it is doubtful that a cost-benefit analysis would uphold the wisdom of gallivanting from one world capital to another. A more sensitive and attuned speaker would set himself the priority of touring the states of Nigeria to acquaint himself with the grim conditions in which most Nigerians live. Such domestic travel is bound to be of greater value, all things considered, than the frequent foreign junkets.

Think also of the many soap operas of impeachment hatched by Nigerian legislators—and executed on a few occasions. During his eight-year run as president, Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo faced no less than five impeachment threats. Carefully drawn articles of impeachment accompanied each threat. Yet, after much heehawing, each threat fizzled, leaving Nigerian and foreign onlookers

bewildered. Had Obasanjo truly betrayed the constitution he was sworn to uphold, as some of us believed and the impeachment documents demonstrated, or were the legislators pursuing their frivolous fancies? How did the same legislature that moved to issue a red card to the former president turn around and spearhead the third term movement—a scam that might have succeeded had Nigerians not opposed it with fury?

Meanwhile, many state legislatures also enacted impeachment dramas of their own, sometimes—as in Anambra, Bayelsa, Plateau, Ekiti and Oyo—under the instigation of Obasanjo. Again the frequency with which the impeachment notices were issued and then discarded left the impression that the lawmakers were far from serious-minded. In fact, some legislators—in Anambra and Oyo, among other places—even met at ungodly hours in seedy hotels to plan their impeachment drives. Such covert schemes gave impeachment—and their legislative vendors—a bad name. Legislators, it was said, were all too willing to use a solemn political instrument as a blackmail tool. By raising their hackles about impeachment, the legislators induced so much fear in the embattled governor, or his sponsors, that some cash was quickly provided to settle the “misunderstanding.”

Nigerian legislators are mired in the gluttony that bedevils the nation’s politics. At a time when teachers are bemoaning the paucity of funds for education; when the Sagamu-Ore-Benin expressway is a long lane of frustration for commuters; when the “supply” has been erased from power supply; when hospitals are in so dire shape that patients are sometimes required to buy iodine as

well as surgical equipment, the Daily Independent last week carried the following headline: “N5.9b Accommodation Loan: NASS Members Set For Showdown With Presidency”.

The gist of the story was captioned in the opening paragraph: “Members of the National Assembly (NASS) may be heading for a collision course with the Presidency over the controversial accommodation facility advanced to them in the wake of their resumption.”

In order to alleviate the lawmakers’ accommodation problem, the government had given N15 million to each senator while each member of the House picked up N12 million. Now the legislators are rattling their sabers because the federal government had the gall to make them pay back this loan they regard as free kola nut.

It is nothing short of a scandal. Here is a country with no infrastructure, with young graduates who are spit onto dreary streets where they become the perennial jobless. And in this same country a few conceited men and women who style themselves “distinguished” senators want to pocket the equivalent of \$190,000—for free! Never mind that this princely sum is more than what a new member of the U.S. Congress earns a year!

These spoilt brats, what planet do they inhabit? Do they know something that the rest of us don’t? Do they have information that Nigeria is the richest country in the world—but secretive about its wealth? Given the mediocrity of their legislative work, and given the fact that most Nigerian doctors, engineers, teachers and other professionals who

work harder earn a fraction of the gargantuan sums lavished on these lawmakers, how do they find the temerity—the shamelessness—to ask for free handouts of N15 million (for senators) and N12 million (for members)?

These free loaders must check themselves before their greed provokes the public to rise in ire and exclaim: Destroy this temple!

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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