

Demo-crazy in Abuja

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By Okey Ndibe

There's a looting frenzy going on in Abuja, and Nigerians should be hopping mad about it.

Last week, Next's Musikilu Mojeed and Elor Nkereuwem gave an enlightening, if disturbing, account of the obscene sums of cash carted home by the looters who misbaptize themselves lawmakers. In reading their report, aptly titled "An Assembly for Looting," one realized the truth of what one always suspected: that Nigeria is a veritable demo-crazy.

What's a demo-crazy? It is quite simply a space run by criminals who mask themselves as devotees of democracy. Mojeed and Nkereuwem's report informed readers that Nigerian "politicians have turned themselves into instant millionaires just for being members of the National Assembly, paying themselves salaries and allowances that will make Bill Gates envious."

My initial response was that the reporters were trading in hyperbole. But that's hardly the case.

Here are some of the miffing facts in their report. Four times this year, each of the 360 members of the House of Representatives will receive N35 million

as "constituency allowance." In conservative terms, that's \$300,000 per member per quarter. At the end of the year, then, each member of the House would have collected a cool \$1.2 million.

If this figure has made you dizzy - or put you in a tizzy - hold on a minute until you hear this one. Each of the 109 senators collects N48 million per quarter. At the end of the year, each senator's haul will be in the neighborhood of \$1.7 million. That's not a bad sum for doing - little to nothing.

In case you're wondering, these legislators gobble enough cash to give pocket money to President Barack Obama. Obama's salary is \$400,000 per annum. That's less than what each Nigerian senator "eats" each quarter.

Mind: this gargantuan "constituency allowance" comes on top of salaries and other sundry allowances by the Abuja "lootocrats." As a former member of the National Assembly told me, there's no requirement that the legislators explain how they spend their so-called "constituency" funds. "Throughout the four years I spent in the House," said this former representative, who asked for anonymity,

“I don’t know of one member who used the money to do anything serious in his or her constituency. The cash was pocketed.”

The two reporters took care to give readers some perspective. “If you are a civil servant, police officer or school teacher,” they wrote, “and you earn N48,000 a month, you will have to work for more than 83 years just to earn what your Senator is walking away.” And that’s just what the senator takes to his bank every three months.

This duo of enterprising reporters made the looting vivid. Considering that Nigeria’s minimum wage stands at N5,500 a month, each senator’s quarterly allowance “will pay for 2,909 workers earning the minimum wage.”

The reporters offered other tantalizing projections. If Nigerians were to fire the entire membership of the National Assembly, the savings would be more than enough to “fund the N88.5billion” Mr. Umaru Yar’Adua budgeted this year for building power plants. Alternatively, we could “fund hospitals and clinics” all over Nigeria, “fix the Benin-Ore Expressway, which has collapsed, or make a significant down payment on the Lagos-Kano railway line.”

Why wait? I personally can’t find much sense in retaining legislators who guzzle such stupendous sums and render mediocre lawmaking. These legislators abdicate even the basic responsibility of screening candidates for cabinet positions.

Where hard questions demand to be asked, our supine legislators invite many a candidate to “bow and go.”

Nigeria’s know that their legislature is dominated by riff raff who got smuggled into their seats by a ruling party that regards elections as do-or-die warfare.

A good number of them hardly understand the rudiments of legislative business.

Watch a televised legislative session and you conjecture that many of these “bow and go” impostors won’t even make the effort to show up.

In close to ten years of a “nascent” freak show we call democracy, the National Assembly is yet to pass a law that even attempted to make a dent on the issues of deepening poverty or stubborn culture of corruption. They are not of the tribe of the poor, and most of them are fully embedded in the bog of corruption.

Yet, these men and women have the cheek - the shameless gut - to plaster themselves with inflated appellations like “Honorable” and “Distinguished Senator.”

If this is the cost of the strange beast called democracy, then Nigerians ought to refuse to pay it. Ideally, legislators should be paid sitting allowances and hired on a part-time basis. It happens in several states in the U.S. If we remove the allure of easy cash, we’re likely to see an improvement in the quality of lawmakers. The leeches who are in it for the cash will take their game elsewhere.

It's time to say to these parasites: "Take a bow and go - home!"

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15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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