

# A Senate of “Distinguished” Mediocrities

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*By Okey Ndibe*

At the inauguration of Nigeria’s latest experiment with “democracy,” the 109 members of the Senate sought to thrash out a question of protocol: How were the members of the senior legislative body to be addressed? The president and governors had taken “His Excellency.” Members of the House of Representatives and state lawmakers had snatched up “Honorable.” What, then, were senators to be called?

After much thought – or, just as likely, little thought – the choice was made. Each member was to be called “Distinguished Senator”.

In much of the world, language has some content behind it, some discernible relationship between it and experience. If you heard somebody described as a distinguished anything, odds are you’d find some measure of distinction (if not an aspiration to greatness) in his or her resume.

But Nigerian senators, even those who had never moved a single motion in their lives, were content to luxuriate in the grandiloquent appellation of “distinguished senator.” You didn’t find enough sober men in that chamber to warn their colleagues of the silliness of inflicting such parodic praise tag on themselves.

Once this question of protocol was settled, the senators seemed to settle into

a collective slumber. You could never guess from their lassitude that Nigeria and Nigerians faced grave problems that required the application of sharp legislative attention.

When I state that these senators sleep, I make that claim literally. Anybody who’s watched a live session of the Senate (or the House of Representatives) is immediately struck by the preponderance of empty seats. The proceeding is often marked by an absence of seriousness. Each member’s lumbering speech is punctuated by references to “Distinguished Senator This” and “Distinguished Senator That.”

Our senators awakened from their distinguished sleep only when they dreamed up another perk, privilege or preferment they felt themselves entitled to. They gallivanted around the world, their focus fixed on fat allowances and their opportunity to bask in the comforts available in countries run by men and women of superior imagination, disciplined vision, and trained acumen.

How many Nigerians would be able to name three things their senators have done since 1999 to significantly improve the quality of life in the country? I bet few, if any. Yes, the legislature finally swept aside former President Olusegun Obasanjo’s ambition to re-write the constitution in order to award himself another four-year ride as president. Yet,

they seemed to act only after Nigerians established their outrage, and only after many in their number had pocketed tens of millions of naira in slush funds to approve Obasanjo's illicit gambit?

A week ago, two reporters at this newspaper, Idris Akinbajo and Elor Nkereuwem, wrote an investigative report that unmasked Nigeria's current crop of senators for the mediocrities they are. The report, simply captioned "The Senate's scorecard," revealed that the Senate had passed only 15 bills in more than two years. This paltry output represents what the reporters aptly described as "a miserable five percent" of the 284 Bills that came before the legislative body.

I don't care what your line of work is: any employee who completes a mere five percent of his or her assigned tasks is a failure. Such an employee would be an eminent candidate for rustication.

Not, however, if you happen to be a Nigerian senator. In the perverted logic of the Senate, five percent performance is a mark of distinction.

Sometimes it appears as if nothing shocks Nigerians anymore. But NEXT's enterprising reporters gave their readers a factoid that ought to get every citizen in a fit of rage: these do-little legislators with out-sized egos have collected N56 billion for their wretched service. That's N4 billion naira per bill passed! Each year, each member of this inept, decrepit Senate hauls home N192 million in so-called "constituency allowance," another scam, pure and simple.

It's robbery in the hallowed name of lawmaking. No nation - much less one

like Nigeria, beset by a myriad of deep and worsening crises - should abide this callous looting and disservice by men and women bereft of moral restraint or legislative sagacity.

Labor leader Denja Yaqub called it right when he told NEXT that the legislators "make progress when it comes to fraud, when it comes to corruption, when it comes to stealing public funds, but they don't make progress on what they are supposed to be doing."

Last year, Nigerian schools were shut for several weeks because the Umaru Yar'Adua government would not guarantee a living wage to teachers. As usual, the National Assembly dozed off as children dawdled at home and teachers were mocked by the then Minister of Education.

Labor, student and other professional groups should insist that the legislative business become a part-time deal. A legislature that spurts fifteen laws in two years should not expect the Nigerian treasury to underwrite its ineptitude.

## 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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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet and political activist. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." He 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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