



Tinubu, NASS, Govs Should also Make Sacrifices

Amid general hardship, poverty-inducing policies and calls for even more sacrifices from the citizenry, President Bola Tinubu, the leadership of the National Assembly and other public office holders continue to assault Nigerians with displays of opulence. While Tinubu headlined a 100-plus-vehicle convoy through Lagos, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tajudeen Abbas, appointed 33 additional aides to minister to his imperial personage! With the country broke and more people sliding into poverty, Tinubu, and every leader at federal, state, and local levels, must make personal sacrifices and drastically cut down on luxuries and the cost of governance.

After removing the petrol subsidy and devaluing the naira, thereby pushing inflation higher, and sending more Nigerians into penury, the President and his supporters have been demanding understanding and patience from the people and calling for sacrifices. Instead of the scrutiny and oversight expected of every parliament, the NASS leadership has been echoing the executive's shock policies. Poverty, on the rise for the past two decades, is gaining momentum.

Invariably, ordinary people and businesses are forced to adjust. Alas, the leaders are not. They are carrying on the unsustainable template of living in sickening luxury at public expense. Tinubu and the 10th NASS met a country with 133 million reckoned to be poor, the jobless rate high and public finances drying up, burdened by debt and prohibitive repayment obligations. The need to cut the costs of governance very drastically and for the leaders to make sacrifices can therefore not be over-emphasised. But on the contrary, the media was awash with video footage of scores of luxury SUVs and battalions of police and other security personnel in a long motorcade blaring sirens and driving on Lagos roads accompanying the President. In Abuja, the Speaker appointed 33 more aides. At the various government houses across the country, governors and legislators continue to luxuriate at taxpayers' expense. Cost-cutting is non-existent in government circles, federal, state, and local. This is not just bad governance; it is treacherous, insensitive, and provocative. Dispensing with the large bureaucracy he inherited, the Tinubu administration should run a lean government and drastically trim the governance costs by reducing unnecessary overheads, and the huge retinue of aides, while expanding the tax net to boost revenues. Unlike his predecessors, Tinubu, an accountant, must adopt fiscal discipline, accountability, prudence, and cost-cutting as guiding principles.

He should start by reducing the eight-aircraft Presidential Air Fleet that his predecessor, Muhammadu Buhari, promised and failed to drastically slash. The number of ministries, departments and agencies should also be drastically reduced. He should dust up, update, and adopt the realistic recommendations in the Stephen Oronsaye report of 2012. The number of 541 MDAs then has since risen to over 600. It suggested reducing statutory agencies from 263 to 161 through mergers, abolition of 38, and reversion of 14 to ministerial departments.

Based partially on the cost of governance, Nigeria is rated one of Africa's worst-governed countries, ranking 37th of 52 countries on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2021, and 12th out of 15 West African states. Mauritius, Cape Verde, and Botswana were the top three in Africa. The Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal

Commission persistently deplores the high cost of governance in the country, describing it as "very high and alarming and therefore, unsustainable as recurrent expenditure continues to significantly exceed capital expenditure."

The Budget Office of the Federation said MDAs gulped N9.7 trillion in three years; their recurrent spending rose from N3.61 trillion in 2015 to N5.26 trillion in 2018, and N7.91 trillion in 2020. Nigeria's debt burden hit N49.95 trillion by March, said the Debt Management Office and is still rising. The World Bank decries Nigeria's worsening fiscal deficit, where 96.3 per cent of government revenue was spent servicing debt in 2022 and is forecast to reach 123.4 per cent soon.

The President should cut waste and luxuries. Symbolically and realistically, he should make personal sacrifices and encourage his appointees to do so. While he is constrained by the constitutional requirement to name one minister from each of the 36 states, Nigeria does not need more than 20 to 22 ministries. He should reduce the number of foreign missions. The NASS should stop creating additional agencies and cost centres, especially academic institutions. The number of ministers, political office holders and their aides should be radically reduced. The country desperately needs funds to mitigate the infrastructure deficit and for education, health, sanitation, and rural facilities. Abbas' large battalion of aides at this time is galling; Tinubu's imperial motorcade is obscene.

Public officers should henceforth be circumspect; already living far above the standard of the citizenry, they should stop taunting Nigerians with their opulent lifestyle sustained at public expense. The N228.1 billion NASS allocation in the 2023 budget is unconscionable and predatory given the parlous state of the public treasury and the rising multidimensional poverty in the country.

Responsible and responsive governments elsewhere are reducing the cost of governance; India is deploying e-governance technology tools, while Ethiopia, Thailand, Kenya, and Rwanda are reducing the number of political appointees. Importantly, the President must strengthen all anti-corruption agencies, inclusive of the police and the Code of Conduct Bureau. It is an unassailable fact that corruption plays a big role in Nigeria's soaring cost of governance as several reported cases of graft have revealed. Blocking revenue leakages and fighting corruption must be the hallmark of the government at all levels. The drive for fiscal discipline must also percolate to the sub-national level where the governors operate with greater impunity and less public scrutiny. They charter flights locally rather than use commercial passenger airlines, and embark on frivolous and fruitless foreign trips under the guise of seeking foreign investors. Citizens should constantly monitor, interrogate, and demand accountability from them. As they demand that Nigerians sacrifice more, the President, governors and lawmakers must make even greater sacrifices and must be seen to do so.

That is the true test of leadership.

Culled from Punch Editorial