

# Nigerians should push back against this egregious obscenity

**N**IGERIA continues to advertise itself as a paradox of the absurd. Its economy is tottering, headlined by record inflation, unemployment, poverty, and debt-servicing rates, yet its politicians persist in awarding humongous benefits and retirement packages for themselves, military, and other public officials. While most Nigerians struggle to survive the worsening economic conditions, unconcerned, the federal and state governments are gifting serving and departing officials with overly generous exit packages. Nigerians should push back against this egregious obscenity.

Provocatively, such spending is trending in the public space. In the supplementary budget of N819.5 billion just passed by the National Assembly, N70 billion was earmarked to cater for members of parliament. Another N40 billion was inserted to provide 465 Sport Utility Vehicles for Senate and House of Representatives members even though 54 percent of the country's youth is jobless, while 133 million persons are multidimensionally poor.

This avaricious behaviour persists, as some former governors who have been elected as senators in the 10th NASS continue to earn huge pensions from their overburdened states. Apart from ex-governor of Ogun State, Gbenga Daniel, who has declined the pension, 12 other former governors-now senators, still receive pensions and allowances from their states.

Reports that the departing Chief of Defence Staff and other military service chiefs, who were retired by President Bola Tinubu in June, are each to receive bullet-proof SUVs, personal aides, guards, and other generous perks, including allowances for medical treatment abroad, as retirement benefits, also defy economic logic.

The Harmonised Terms and Conditions of Service for Officers of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, 2017, a revised version of the HTACOS 2012, listed the benefits of a retiring CDS and service chiefs to include one bullet-proof SUV or equivalent vehicle to be maintained by the service, and to be replaced every four years; a Peugeot 508 or equivalent back-up vehicle; and five domestic aides — two service cooks, two stewards and a civilian gardener. Each of them is also entitled to an Aide-de-Camp/security officer; special assistant of a lieutenant/captain or equivalent, or personal assistant of the rank of warrant officer or equivalent; and nine other soldiers as guards. The retired service chiefs are entitled to three service drivers; one service orderly; escorts to be provided by the appropriate military units/formations as the need arises; and free medical cover in Nigeria and abroad. This was a significant scale-up of the 2012 version of the HTACOS. Similarly, 18 state governors, who relinquished power to their successors on May 29 went home with high end bullet-proof vehicles and other luxuries provided in the states' respective pension laws for them and their deputies. Meanwhile, the Debt Management Office listed the states, where the ex-governors ruled like feudal lords, as swimming in mounting debts and billions in unpaid workers' salaries and pension liabilities. According to the DMO, the ex-governors left behind a total indebtedness of N3.06 trillion, made up of N2.27 trillion domestic loans, and \$1.71 billion foreign borrowing. In some states, the incumbent governors have been having running battles with their predecessors, including the invasion of the former governors' residences and offices to retrieve state property

like luxury vehicles allegedly taken away illegally. The greed is entrenched. At the legislative level, the country just witnessed the sickening ritual of exiting and returning lawmakers awarding themselves huge monetary benefits and property. Instead of leaving furniture for their successors, federal lawmakers are taking public property home, including television sets, cabinet shelves, electronics, computers, furniture, and solar power systems. This is preposterous!

The former and re-elected NASS members were also engaged in moving those items out of their respective offices and residences. This has become the tradition; new items now need to be purchased for the 10th NASS members. Similar scenarios are playing out in the states.

As if these are not enough, the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission recently made a proposal to raise the salaries and allowances of political office holders by 114 percent. The huge public backlash made the Presidency to issue a statement that it had not endorsed the proposal. Nigeria's governance practices, where a few appropriate public resources for personal aggrandisement, is a guarantor of mass poverty.

In the United States, from where Nigeria copied its presidential system, the Former Presidents' Act provides several lifetime benefits to former presidents who have not been removed from office. Under it, former presidents receive a pension equal to the salary of a cabinet secretary (minister). As of 2020, this was \$219,200 per year, and since January 2022, \$226,300. The pension begins immediately after a president's departure from office. This is an economy with a GDP of \$25.46 trillion compared to Nigeria's \$477.39 billion, per World Bank figures.

*Nigeria's Federal Government owed its workers N213.4 billion in pension liabilities under the Contributory Pension Scheme as of December 2022, said the National Pension Commission. Most states are similarly indebted. In some states, including Abia, Benue and Taraba, the new governors are battling with several months of unpaid workers' salaries and pension. Instead of providing jumbo benefits for a few privileged persons, Nigeria must start caring for everybody. No citizen should retire into poverty, while a few live-in affluences at their expense. The culture of departing state governors instructing the rubber stamp state legislatures to pass laws awarding them generous retirement remuneration should be resisted and stopped.*

*Nigeria's politicians are rapacious, and insufferably brazen. The country owes N77 trillion, spends 96.6 percent of all revenues on debt servicing as revealed by the World Bank, and the federal and state governments borrow just to keep the bureaucracy running.*

*It is unconscionable asking other Nigerians to endure sacrifices caused by poor governance and harsh policies while the leaders make none, but continue to luxuriate at public expense. The times call for the leadership to drastically cut down their benefits, and the size of the bureaucracy. Tinubu should lead the way. Labour unions and civil society organisations should mobilise and persistently protest this travesty.*

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*Culled from Punch Editorial 18<sup>th</sup> July 2023*