

Nigeria: In search of a professional legislature

By Taiwo Adisa

The United States Congress, on November 20, held a public hearing on Nigeria's security situation and the declaration of the most populous black nation as a "Country of Particular Concern" by President Donald Trump. The public hearing at the U.S. Congress came weeks after the presidential announcement, which jolted the Nigerian officials and, to some extent, prompted some hurried attempts to tame the scourge of insecurity in the country. Somewhat regrettably, however, the Nigerian parliament, whose representatives have the duty to make laws for good governance of the federation, perform oversight on other arms of government, and represent the interests of their constituents, slept off when it mattered most. The parliament in Abuja only realized the need to address the menace of insecurity a week after their United States counterparts had spent almost a full day debating a matter they were not really paid to dwell on. At the hearing on November 20, the US lawmakers sweated, shed tears, and raged at the failure of the government in the African country to protect its citizens from killers who sneaked into their environment, churches, and homes at dead hours to create havoc. The hearing, conducted by the House Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee, debated the classification of Nigeria as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, condemned the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, which some lawmakers called genocide, proposed targeted sanctions, humanitarian support, security support, and diplomatic pressure to enable Nigeria to address issues of religious freedom.

Nearly a week after the U.S. lawmakers had burnt the midnight oil on Nigeria, the Abuja lawmakers suddenly set up sessions to debate the same topic. First, the House of Representatives held sessions on insecurity from November 25-27. The lawmakers passed some resolutions, including the proposal to place a ban on ransom payment, key security reforms in the recruitment process into the military, as well as judicial reforms, strengthened Intelligence gathering and the use of drones and technology, adoption of state policing, international cooperation, and border control. On November 26, the Nigerian Senate held its own version of a security hearing,



where it came up with resolutions, including the classification of kidnapping as terrorism, an investigation into the conduct of the military in the Kebbi State kidnapping saga, international cooperation, as well as reforms of military operations and the judicial process.

Our elders say that it is the owner of a load who must carry it from the heaviest point. The Nigerian situation is, however, providing us with the antithesis-others are free to shed tears at the demise of our relations-as we continue to show unconcern. That was the tragedy of the Nigerian legislature. But the coffin of shamelessness was further

nailed by former Comrade Adams Aliyu Oshiomhole, the Senator representing Edo North, when he complained against Senate President Godswill Akpabio for yielding the Senate floor to an opposition lawmaker, Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe of Abia South, to speak on the matter of insecurity. According to the media report, which quoted Oshiomhole, Akpabio was wrong in the eyes of the Edo lawmaker, a former Labour leader, for allowing the opposition senators to speak on a matter of national concern, "because they are not members of the APC."

Such are the soundbites and antics of the Nigerian legislature, which have continued to oil the widening trust deficit between them and the people they represent. Such are the factors that have energized the negative perceptions the Nigerian legislature has continued to suffer since its inception in 1999. Nigerians have tagged them "legislooters," "rubber stamp," and "Ghana Must Go" assembly, and all sorts of derisive names. But there appears to be no reprieve on the horizon for this institution, which is so central in a democracy that it can at best be described as a necessary evil. While attempting a scholarly reading into what ails our legislature and why the actors therein and the citizens they represent perpetually engage in a "dialogue of the deaf", I undertook a study for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in the University of Abuja, zeroing on the topic: Political Communication and Legislative Credibility in Nigeria: A study of the National Assembly, 2003-2023. It was a longitudinal study that sought to layer the challenges of communication in the

legislature alongside the ancillary problems of high turnover and poor service delivery by that arm of government. The study referenced the Global Parliamentary Report (UNDP/IPU, 2012) and NILS (2014), among others, to affirm the declining public trust in the legislature. “Following a survey of 190 countries, the Global Parliamentary Report (2012) confirmed the declining public trust in the legislature, with the Nigerian parliament scoring a paltry 34.5 per cent approval rating. “The study referenced Loewenberg (2010), whose report affirmed that parliaments are becoming “Puzzlingly unpopular” and that there are “wider set of challenges” against the legitimacy of the legislature. NILS (2014) also affirmed the high turnover rate after parliamentary elections of 2003, 2007, and 2011, reporting a 70% turnover rate in the Nigerian legislature, which it said was the highest in the world,” the study submitted. It also referenced Adeniyi (2017), who submitted that “there is a huge distrust between the public and their elected representatives and that the electorate generally feels that the representatives often perform below expectations,” while affirming the submission of Beetham (2006), who identified a growing puzzle around the legislature called “democracy paradox.” as a key challenge besetting parliaments and democratic practice in the 21st Century. That paradox, according to scholars, is occasioned by the wide gap between what democracy promises and what it practically offers, which Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio described as the “broken promises” of democracy. It is a situation that creates disillusionment about democratic practice, as it affects the perception of the legislature among the people. Despite the avalanche of communication tools and forms in this era, the Nigerian parliament still suffers from a poor perception by the hostile public. The Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) also noted what, however, looked like an egregious frustration when it submitted that while citizens have continued to raise concerns about lack of effective representation on the one hand, the legislators equally complained about poor understanding of legislative practices by their constituents, reaffirming what Olayiwola (1991) described as “a dialogue of the deaf where either party cannot hear themselves.” While the UNDP/IPU global reports on parliaments somewhat suggest a global

occurrence of declining public trust in parliaments, the truth is that the trust deficit in Nigeria could be scary. Apart from holding the wrong baton of being the country with the highest legislator turnover in the world, which averages 70 per cent after every election cycle since 2003, it also presents one of the least responsive parliaments across the globe. And that is despite the fact that the Nigerian Constitution 1999 (as amended) highlights that the representative function of the parliamentarian is the most highly rated among other functions. The way the assembly has handled this CPC classification and the insecurity hearings cannot in any way help its already soiled image. So, how do the lawmakers extricate themselves from the woes of poor perception, poor representation, aspirational gap, and all that? How does the nation get the best of its lawmakers? The study recommends huge functions for the political parties. The idea is to ensure a professional recruitment process, whereby the political parties outsource a section of the recruitment work to human resource professionals to help in determining fit and proper



candidates for election into the legislative chambers. The study submitted: “The elected representatives must do well by emphasizing representation as the bedrock of their roles, while continuous civic education of the electorate is needed to sensitize the people to correctly appreciate the duties of a lawmaker and the inherent powers already donated to them by the constitution to discipline erring legislators. The recruitment process of lawmakers must be carefully streamlined to ensure the emergence of professional legislators who will, over the years, develop into subject-matter experts, help legislative oversight, and assist the executive in the discharge of its duties. By electing people with eyes on legislative careers instead of mere power mongers and persons seeking elective office for personal gains, the constituency would gain better democracy dividends.”