

Will NJC Be Able To Clean Its House As 256 Judges Come Under Probe

By Chidi Odinkalu

In an unprecedented move, the National Judicial Council (NJC) has zeroed in on more than 256 judges accused of complicity in various forms of judicial malfeasance. The Council, the apex body for judicial administration in the country, also suspended two high court judges for one year without pay for misconduct and for breaching the right to a fair hearing. These developments followed renewed efforts by Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) Kudirat Kekere-Ekun to cleanse the Augean stable. Justice Kekere-Ekun declared her zero-tolerance for corruption when she appeared before the Senate for screening as the 23rd substantive CJN on September 25, 2024. Thereafter, she embarked on far-reaching reforms that included the sanitization of the process for recruiting judges. In a clear departure from the old format, publication of the list of candidates shortlisted for appointment to the bench became a mandatory requirement. This paved the way for the public to blow the whistle on candidates with a deficit in their integrity quotient. While the CJN took time to perfect a system that would guarantee accountability from the bench, calls for swifter action grew louder. On November 17, 2025, President Bola Tinubu amplified calls for reform by urging the judiciary to take decisive action to address questions about its integrity, warning that justice must never be for sale. "My administration believes that a Judiciary that is strong in capacity, efficient in process, and uncompromising in integrity is not merely desirable; it is indispensable to the survival of our democracy and the prosperity of our nation.

We cannot build a just society without a fearless and functional Judiciary. "Corruption in any arm of government weakens the nation, but corruption in the Judiciary destroys it at its core. When justice is compromised, governance loses its integrity, and democracy loses its foundation," President Tinubu stated as he flagged off the 2025 All Nigerian Judges Conference of the Superior Courts in Abuja. While acknowledging the concerns raised by President Tinubu, the CJN vowed to tackle the issue head-on. She said: "It is no secret that segments of the public hold a critical perception of the Judiciary. There exists a widespread notion that our processes are slow, inefficient, and sometimes vulnerable to external influences. "We must confront this perception head-on, not with rhetoric, but with deliberate and demonstrable action that restores confidence in our courts. "A Judiciary that commands respect must be unwavering in upholding independence, firm in strengthening ethical standards, and resolute in eliminating inefficiencies in court administration. "On the persistent issue of corruption, we can no longer afford to regard our institution as beyond scrutiny. We must admit, with candour, that there are some within our ranks who have undermined the integrity of the Bench. This must change," the CJN added. Although the CJN did not attempt to conceal the rot within the judiciary, she warned against blanket allegations of corruption, insisting such claims be supported by evidence.

The NJC, headed by the CJN, was created under Section 153 of the 1999 Constitution, as amended, to safeguard the independence of the

judiciary and ensure accountability in judicial administration. In what appears to be the first major sweep to root out rotten eggs on the bench, the NJC — in a landmark resolution following its 111th meeting on May 13 — queried 256 judges over various performance-related issues. The Council deliberated on the report of 98 petitions submitted by its Preliminary Complaints Assessment Committees. Out of the petitions considered, 68 were dismissed for lack of merit, four judges were cautioned, one judge received a final warning, while 11 petitions were recommended for further investigation. Reports suspending proceedings in some petitions on the grounds that the matters were sub judice were also adopted by the Council. The NJC's disciplinary procedure is a structured, multi-stage process. It begins with the receipt of a formal complaint, advances through screening and investigation, and affords the judicial officer in question an opportunity to respond and appear before an inquiry panel. The process concludes with the Council's deliberation and decision — which may result in admonition,

suspension, a recommendation for removal, or other appropriate sanctions — followed by publication of the outcome. The Council rejected appeals filed by eight judges of the Imo State Judiciary seeking a reversal of their compulsory retirement from service over age falsification. It found that the affected judges failed to present fresh evidence capable of justifying a reversal of the sanctions imposed on them.

The judges were among 10 judicial officers recommended for compulsory retirement at the Council's 109th meeting held on June 25, 2025. While nine of them were found to have altered their dates of birth in official records to unlawfully extend their years in service, a junior judge was sanctioned for making himself available to be sworn in as Acting Chief Judge despite being fourth in the hierarchy of judges, contrary to Section 271(4) of the 1999 Constitution, as amended. However, the Council reinstated

Justice T. I. Nze of the Customary Court of Appeal after he presented credible evidence before the NJC review committee. NJC Deputy Director of Information, Kemi Babalola-Ogedengbe stated that the Council also considered 13 investigation reports on petitions filed against judicial officers across the country over the handling of cases before them. Eight of the petitions were dismissed for lack of merit, want of diligent prosecution, or for being time-barred. Remarkably, the NJC at the meeting resolved to refer one Mbadiwe Ossai to the Inspector-General of Police for investigation and prosecution for alleged perjury, while five lawyers were referred to the LPDC "for writing frivolous and unsubstantiated petitions calculated to harass and intimidate judicial officers." Likewise, the NJC said it identified one Yusuf Isa as a serial petitioner and barred him from further presenting petitions before it. On judicial performance evaluation, the NJC commended nine judges for exemplary performance during the 2024 and 2025 legal years. Two judges are to receive letters of commendation for delivering more than 21 considered judgments within the review period, while seven others will receive appreciation letters for commendable performance.

