

# House of the People or House of Deals?

## When representation becomes transaction in Nigeria's legislature

By Lanre Ogundipe

A legislature, in its purest conception, is not merely a lawmaking institution; it is the moral compass of a nation. It is where competing interests are refined into collective purpose, where truth is expected to prevail over expediency, and where power is subjected to scrutiny in the interest of the people. That is the ideal. In Nigeria, however, the widening gap between that ideal and reality compels a more uncomfortable question: Has the legislature remained a house of the people, or has it evolved into a house of deals? The National Assembly of Nigeria—comprising the Nigerian Senate and the House of Representatives—was never designed as a transactional arena. Its constitutional mandate is clear: lawmaking, oversight, and the defence of national interest. Yet, increasingly, its conduct suggests something else. Recent developments in legislative screening processes have brought this concern into sharper focus. In the consideration of nominees for sensitive national roles—such as leadership of regulatory and technical institutions—questions of competence and suitability have sometimes appeared secondary to signals of political comfort. In certain instances, support seems to crystallize even before rigorous interrogation is complete, raising an unsettling question: when outcomes appear predetermined, what becomes of scrutiny? This is not an isolated pattern. There have been moments when individuals passed through legislative confirmation only for serious doubts to surface shortly after about their preparedness for office. There have also been internal episodes within the legislature where disciplinary actions, rather than reinforcing institutional

integrity, have generated further controversy about fairness, consistency, and motive. Each case, taken alone, may be explained away. Taken together, they form a pattern that is harder to dismiss. A pattern of accommodation over accountability. A pattern of alignment over interrogation. A pattern that suggests a gradual but significant institutional drift. The problem is not representation.

In a federation as complex and diverse as Nigeria, representation is indispensable. Every region must have a voice. Every constituency must feel included in the national conversation. But representation was never intended to become a substitute for judgment or a shield against scrutiny. Today, however, legislative engagement too often appears driven by a narrower calculus: What does my bloc gain? Who must be satisfied? What balance must be preserved? In that moment, national interest becomes negotiable. Policies are no longer assessed primarily on merit but on distributive convenience. Critical reforms are weakened to accommodate competing pressures. Urgency is sacrificed for equilibrium. What should be a process of rational deliberation becomes one of calibrated concession. It is within this environment that mediocrity finds fertile ground. A legislature that ought to act as a gatekeeper of competence—through rigorous screening and fearless oversight—sometimes appears to lower its guard. Individuals entrusted with significant national responsibilities are shielded not necessarily by their ability, but by their affiliations. Ethnic



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***Representation must inform judgment, not override it. Oversight must be consistent, not selective. Confirmation must be thorough, not ceremonial. Above all, public office must be understood not as an opportunity for negotiation, but as a duty of service. Until that recalibration occurs, the question will continue to echo across the land—louder, sharper, and more urgent with each passing year: Is this truly a House of the People—or merely a House of Deals? The answer will not be found in speeches or symbolism. It will be found in conduct—visible, measurable, and accountable conduct. For now, that answer remains uncertain. And a nation cannot rise above the quality of the institutions that govern it.***

identity becomes a defence. Political loyalty becomes a credential. Proximity to power becomes a substitute for preparation. And so, standards begin to erode—not abruptly, but incrementally. Failure is rationalized. Underperformance is managed. Accountability is negotiated. Over time, what should be exceptional becomes normalized, and what should be unacceptable becomes tolerable. Meanwhile, the public narrative remains skewed. The executive arm of government, by virtue of its visibility, absorbs the bulk of national frustration. Presidents, ministers, and agency heads become the primary symbols of governance failure.

Yet governance is not a solitary enterprise. Laws are enacted by the legislature. Appointments are confirmed by it. Budgets are scrutinized—or insufficiently scrutinized—within its chambers. When the legislature underperforms, the consequences are systemic. This is the truth that must be confronted: governance failure in Nigeria is not isolated—it is

collaborative. What is unfolding is not merely inefficiency; it is a gradual redefinition of institutional purpose. The legislature risks shifting from being a guardian of the public good to becoming an arena where interests are traded, outcomes are negotiated, and silence is sometimes more valuable than scrutiny. Not always. Not entirely. But frequently enough to shape outcomes. And when such a perception takes root, the damage extends beyond policy. It erodes trust—the invisible currency upon which effective governance depends. Citizens begin to question not just decisions, but the integrity of the processes that produce them. Merit struggles to compete with influence. Reform becomes rhetoric. Progress becomes uncertain. In such an environment, even well-intentioned policies face resistance, not necessarily because they are flawed, but because the system that produces them is no longer trusted.

Then the inevitable question arises: Can a nation grow under such conditions? The answer is neither emotional nor ideological—it is structural. No nation can achieve sustainable development where: competence is secondary, accountability is conditional, and national interest is routinely subordinated to sectional considerations. Growth, in such circumstances, becomes fragile. Gains are uneven. Confidence is weak. Institutions—no matter how well designed—struggle to deliver consistent outcomes. Nigeria's challenge, therefore, is not the absence of frameworks. It is not the absence of laws. It is not even the absence of capable individuals within its legislative system. The challenge is one of discipline and alignment—the consistent alignment of authority with responsibility, of representation with reason, of power with principle.

The legislature must reclaim its role—not as a broker of interests, but as a steward of national direction. This reclamation will not occur through declarations. It will occur through decisions. Through a renewed commitment to rigorous scrutiny. Through the courage to prioritize competence over convenience. Through the willingness to uphold national interest, even when it conflicts with political comfort. Representation must inform judgment, not override it. Oversight must be consistent, not selective. Confirmation must be thorough, not ceremonial. Above all, public office must be understood not as an opportunity for negotiation, but as a duty of service. Until that recalibration occurs, the question will continue to echo across the land—louder, sharper, and more urgent with each passing year: Is this truly a House of the People—or merely a House of Deals? The answer will not be found in speeches or symbolism. It will be found in conduct—visible, measurable, and accountable conduct. For now, that answer remains uncertain. And a nation cannot rise above the quality of the institutions that govern it.

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