

# AKPABIO, UZODINMA AND THE 2027 GAME

By Olusegun Adeniyi

Despite Standing Rules practically exempting him from serving as a principal officer in the 8th Senate, the name of a certain Godswill Akpabio was announced in plenary as Minority Leader on 28th July 2015. Having left office as Akwa Ibom State Governor just a few weeks before, Akpabio had been nominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) for the position. But Kabir Marafa, then an All Progressives Congress (APC) Senator from Zamfara State, challenged the decision on grounds that Akpabio was not qualified to be a principal officer in the chamber as a first-time senator, especially when the PDP had many returning (ranking) senators who could fill the position. Although Marafa cited the requisite provisions of the Senate Standing Rules to back his claim, he was immediately countered by then Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu, who insisted that it was an internal affair of the PDP and none of his (Marafa's) business as an APC member. "If the ranking senators cannot take the position for any reason, then the next level of ranking senators can be considered," Ekweremadu argued, while explaining that Akpabio was the only candidate the PDP would nominate for the office. In using his gavel to end the debate, then Senate President, Dr Bukola Saraki told Marafa that since the PDP senators were not complaining, he (Marafa) should "stop crying more than the bereaved." Of course, we all remember that three years later, precisely on 7 August 2018, Akpabio resigned his position as Minority Leader, joined the ruling APC and was subsequently 'rewarded' with a cabinet appointment by the late President Muhammadu Buhari. But having learnt enough (from his own experience) on how the Senate Standing Rules could easily be manipulated to achieve a predetermined end, it came as no surprise that Akpabio would ram through a controversial rule that legislates for his future ambition. In the coming 11th Senate, according to the 'Akpabio Law', nobody can be Senate President "unless he has been elected and served as a Senator for at least two full terms of eight years, one of which shall immediately precede such election."

Barely 48 hours after the controversial session ended, Senate Leader, Opeyemi Bamidele came with another amendment to the amendment because they had put the cart before the horse. "Election of the officers will have to take place, as it had always been, before the swearing-in of senators," Opeyemi said in explaining how they breached section 52 of the 1999 Constitution while enacting the 'Akpabio Law'. Of course, the 'minor error' was immediately corrected and the new rule still stands but Senator Adams Oshiomhole, who had opposed the whole shenanigan, put something on record. "I believe the average age in this Senate is over 40, and so we don't have an excuse for youthful exuberance," Oshiomhole said while criticising the underhand manner the amendment was imposed without debate such that basic errors were made in the process. He then amplified his misgivings on ARISE Television during the week: "You don't make laws either for yourself or against specific individuals that you fear will come."

The new rule is reportedly targeted at the current Imo State Governor, Chief Hope Uzodinma, who represented Imo West Senatorial District from 2011 to 2019. Beyond his position in the APC hierarchy as Chair of their Governors Forum, Uzodinma understands how the game is played in the Senate chamber where, as of today, he has spent more time than Akpabio. And Uzodinma is a politician you ignore to your own peril. As an aside, the battle for the Imo West Senatorial ticket promises to be intriguing. Uzodinma will battle former Governor Rochas Okorocha (who had also spent 2019 to 2023 in the Senate) and the incumbent Osita Izunaso who had similarly been in the Senate between 2007 and 2011 before the current session. Interestingly, Uzodinma's gubernatorial tenure ends in January 2028 so by contesting for Senate in the 2027 general election, all kinds of cold calculations, including getting a 'placeholder' to warm a critical public office for him, are being designed. "My dear people of Imo West Senatorial District have once again called upon me to serve, and I have accepted the noble call with humility, sincerity of purpose, and unwavering commitment to the collective advancement of our people," Uzodinma posted on his X handle after the screening by his party last weekend.

Since no law bars him from contesting the Senate even as a serving governor,

Uzodinma is in a prime position to eat his cake and still have it. If he loses the senatorial election, he remains the Governor of Imo State. If he wins the election and the Senate Presidency gambit fails, he can still refuse to be sworn in as an 'ordinary' Senator and return to Imo. Should that happen, the seat will be declared vacant. And knowing Nigeria, the subsequent by-election can even be delayed until Uzodinma leaves office in January 2028 so he can contest again. I have looked at all the permutations on this Imo West Senatorial District matter vis-à-vis the ambition of Uzodinma and none of them is about the public good. But then, which politician is making strategic personal calculations in promotion of the public good? Meanwhile, Akpabio may have gotten away with his new rules but if I understand how power works in Abuja, he is wasting his time. It would take no more than a few minutes to have those rules changed again the moment it becomes clear that Aso Rock prefers somebody else for the senate presidency next year. After all, if it were left to the Senators, Abdulaziz Yari and not Akpabio would be holding the Senate gavel today. But there are issues with the senate rules-change that we should not gloss over. When such an important institution shuns accountability to prioritise self-serving legislation that weakens public trust and undermines the rule of law, we have a problem. It



may not have been his intention but Oshiomhole touched on something fundamental in his admonition to colleagues on 'youthful exuberance': It is about the kind of maturity expected of the Senate. I once referenced an interesting article on the website of the Dirksen Congressional Centre written by Betty K. Koed, an associate historian at the United States Senate Historical Office. It highlights why the Senate is a critical legislative institution: *It is said that on his return from France after the framers had completed the U.S. Constitution, creating two houses of Congress, Thomas Jefferson called George Washington to account for having agreed to a second chamber. "Of what use is the Senate?" Jefferson asked Washington, as he stood before the fire with a cup of tea in his hand. As he asked the question, Jefferson poured some of the tea into his saucer, swirled it around a bit, and then poured it back into the teacup.*

*"You have answered your own question," Washington replied. "What do you mean?" Jefferson asked. "Why did you pour the tea into your saucer?" To cool it," said Jefferson. "Just so," said Washington, "that is why we created the Senate. The Senate is the saucer into which we pour legislation to cool."* Although smaller in number, the Senate is the most important legislative institution which plays unique roles in federal systems. Such critical roles include the confirmation of executive/judicial

appointments, removal of presidents, and in crucial national security moments, declaration of wars. Such an institution should not be a place where rules are rigged by presiding officers for self-serving ends. Therefore, the senators who conceived the 'Akpabio Law' may say they have the power to do what they did, but by not weighing the moral implications of their action, they have done incalculable injury to the institution. The primary role of the legislature is to pass laws for good governance and the protection of the rights and interests of citizens. But with such a cynical rules-change, according to a Prof. Brown Imasuen, Akpabio and his cohort have effectively neutered the democratic essence of the legislature. "Leadership positions in the Senate are not mere ceremonial perches; they determine committee chairmanships, legislative priorities, budgetary allocations, and the vigour of oversight," Imasuen wrote to explain the implications of treating power as an inheritance. "When these positions are pre-ordained for a select clique, many of whom, like Akpabio, have accumulated more scandals than achievements, the entire legislative machinery becomes an extension of personal empires rather than a servant of the people." To Imasuen whose trending online piece, 'Akpabio's Brazen Rape of Legislative Democracy,' hits the nail on the head, the rules-change gambit exposes the rot at the core of our current democratic experiment. "A legislature that cannot even manage its own succession without descending into self-serving chicanery has no moral authority to lecture the executive or the judiciary. It becomes complicit in the national failure," Imasuen wrote and I concur. "The developmental paralysis indicated by youth unemployment, brain drain, crumbling education and health systems, and pervasive insecurity stems fundamentally from this elite consensus that public office is a private estate, rules are malleable, and the people are expendable." I honestly don't know what else to add!

# South Africa: We are all victims

By Abiodun Komolafe

South Africa has pursued post-apartheid policies, the consequences of which we are seeing today. The country has a terrifying, soft underbelly which is now completely hopeless and uncompetitive in today's evolution; and therefore, it has to misdirect its aggression against soft targets such as fellow Black Africans. This is to be expected; for, at any time in history, those misdirecting their frustration look for easy, low-hanging fruits. The terror is not directed at just Nigerians; it is against all Africans and the disadvantaged within the country. If we want to be expansive, we can plead in mitigation that the root cause can be traced, partly, to the failure of the African National Congress (ANC) during the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) negotiating process to repudiate the apartheid-era debts. This historical compromise has limited the scope of the state for more effective social intervention programmes through public investments, as well as a much-needed revamp of the curricula to help the disadvantaged and the dispossessed.

Structurally, South Africa is, of course, the leading economy in Africa. It has, for example, over 21,000 legally registered mining companies (we must ponder how many mining companies Nigeria has, legally registered). Mzansi also has the biggest stock exchange and manufacturing base on the continent. We cannot, in any rational way, compare Nigeria to South Africa; it is no contest. This is why, even with all the public disagreements, President Donald Trump sent a high-level delegation to South Africa just last week to negotiate critical trade and resource agreements. Due to flawed economic policies and a blurring of ideological focus within the post-apartheid ANC, income disparity in South Africa has metastasized. This inequality fuels a wave of criminality that the ruling party, bound by tactical political convenience, seems unable to confront head-on. Yet, the Nigerian political establishment - having long condoned its own share of non-state infractions - is in no position to cast the first stone. The Nigerian state, too, has its own soft underbelly, which is focused on the electoral calculus. An accommodation must be worked out now, particularly as Nigeria is finally posting an ambassador to

Pretoria. Whatever accommodation is worked out, the intervention - no matter how misinterpreted by Senator Adams Oshiomhole - must not be completely ruled out. Oshiomhole's call to nationalize South Africa's assets in Nigeria was a strategic misstep, for reasons already well-documented. Instead, "Boycott" - the very tactic used, ironically, to dismantle the apartheid state - should have been canvassed.

This would force a dialogue where Nigeria could bargain from a position of undeniable strength. A satire on TikTok captures this brilliantly. The reel listed South African companies operating in Nigeria and then contrasted this with Nigerian-registered entities operating in the RSA. The comparison showed emphatically that Nigerians' incursion into South Africa consists almost completely of religious organizations. This illustrates that there can be



no trade war in South Africa to Nigeria's detriment. It is the South Africans, with hundreds of millions in hard currency extracted annually from Nigeria, who have a very great deal to lose. The sooner the Nigerian government realizes the leverage it has, the better for the tens of thousands of Nigerians residing in that country. The ANC must accept a lot of blame. In giving up nuclear weapons, The Rainbow Nation should have insisted on a quid pro quo; that is, the repudiation of the apartheid-era debts. For sure, that's why the country currently can't do much about the social inequality troubling the land. South Africa versus Nigeria! Ghana versus Nigeria! What we have on our hands is classic Andre Gunder Frank: \_ 'The Development of Underdevelopment.' \_ May the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, grant us peace in Nigeria!