

Is the National Assembly Redeemable?

Fresh accusations that members of the National Assembly demanded N480 million from federal universities to approve their 2025 budget allocations is a stark reminder of the entrenched corruption plaguing Nigeria's federal parliament. Is the NASS redeemable? According to media reports, lawmakers, operating through the Senate Committee on Tertiary Education and the House Committee on University Education, are allegedly coercing vice-chancellors of about 60 federal universities to pay N8 million each to secure their budget approvals. If true, this would undermine the integrity of the parliament again.

The NASS has strongly denied the allegations, calling them a blackmail. A VC has also disdained bribe demands allegations by the House Committee on Education members. Unfortunately, the controversy rages because the scandal has a familiar ring. It is part of a disturbing pattern of sleaze that has defined Nigeria's political landscape. The NASS has been enmeshed in a long list of scandals that have exposed the penchant for lawmakers to equate their legislative duties with making money illicitly.

In 2005, Fabian Osuji, the Minister of Education, was dismissed over allegations of offering a N55 million bribe to the then senate president and others to influence the ministry's budget. In 2012, Farouk Lawan, a House member, was caught in a sting operation by the self-styled DSS concerning a \$500,000 bribery case involving billionaire businessman Femi Otedola. Lawan was convicted of soliciting a \$3 million bribe to remove Otedola's company from a list of firms indicted in a fuel subsidy scam.

After this, Abdurashed Maina, who headed the Pension Reform Task Team, was jailed for looting N2.1 billion. He had accused Aloysius Etok, chairman of the Senate investigating committee of demanding a \$100,000 bribe. The former director of pensions in the office of the Head of Service of the Federation, Sani Teidi, also accused Etok of collecting N3 billion to suppress the investigation.

NASS members routinely demand money during simple oversight visits. In 2019, the Director-General of the National Agency for Food, Drugs

Administration and Control, Mojisola Adeyeye, accused House Committee on Healthcare Services members of asking her for "money for welfare" during a visit. Former Kaduna State governor, Nasir el-Rufai once accused lawmakers of demanding bribes to approve his nomination as FCT minister.

These episodes highlight the pervasive culture of monetization of legislative oversight functions. When lawmakers, entrusted with the sacred duty of representing the people's interests, engage in corrupt practices, it erodes public trust and delegitimises the institutions of governance.

Rather than exercise strict oversight to curb wastage in government expenditure, lawmakers routinely swell the budget with implementable and bogus projects and contracts. This makes a mess of the budgeting and execution process and adds to the scandalous number of abandoned projects nationwide. It is shameful that Nigerian lawmakers engage in all sorts of corrupt practices despite being the highest paid in the world with humongous allowances and perks in tow. A senator's monthly take-home pay is N21 million.

In late 2023, N57 billion was approved to import 360 SUVs for lawmakers amid public outrage. In March 2024, Cross River senator Agom Jarigbe revealed that ranking senators got N500 million each for so-called constituency projects, others got less. Last August, senators got N2 million each, enough to pay the N70,000 minimum wage for 28 months, as "kola" to enjoy their recess.

It is horrendous that lawmakers can demand bribes from universities already crippled by chronic underfunding. Many cannot even pay their electricity bills. Yet, some lawmakers graduated from these universities paying next to nothing for their education. This episode stinks. This odious conduct persists because there are no consequences. There must be a comprehensive review of the legislative oversight functions to ensure they are conducted transparently and in the public interest.

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