

Why Does Nigeria Buy Official Cars Every Budget Year?

By Farooq A. Kperogi

Ever since I started consciously monitoring the business of the government, I have always wondered why Nigeria's yearly budgets unfailingly allocate astronomical amounts of money to buy the same items—cars, cutlery, furniture, etc.—that should last for years before needing replacement. What happens to the items that are replaced every year? Who keeps them? And what necessitates the ritual of replacing items in perfect condition every year, especially for a country that says allocating money for subsidies to make life a little easier for people is too



year, utensils every year. To open more revenue streams or block loopholes, we need to scrutinize these ministries' budgets. If they bought vehicles last year, they should hold off because vehicles do not expire." The speech went viral because it resonated with vast swaths of Nigerians who had been caught up in what we call a "spiral of silence" in communication theory, which occurs when people suppress their opinions about an issue because they (often incorrectly) assume that their opinions are in the minority and therefore unwelcome. That someone who is deeply inserted into the inner

I thought the speech would ignite a soul-searching national conversation about Nigeria's wasteful budgeting practices. However, it seems it didn't. If it did, I must have missed it. But let's face it. There are not many regular people on the face of this earth who change their cars, computers, utensils, etc. every year. Even wealthy people use these items for a few years before changing them. Why does a country whose governments routinely proclaim that they are too poor to be able to afford subsidizing the energy consumption of its struggling population spend stratospheric amounts of money to replenish one-year-old items for people in government every single year?

much of a burden? I never wrote about this because I had assumed that there must be some arcane justification that I failed to grasp for this profligate annual budgetary ritual. Not wanting to be an ultracrepidarian (as people who comment authoritatively on subjects they have little or no knowledge of are called), I had chosen to simply wonder in silence—or perhaps ask people in government why they expend scarce resources to change items in excellent conditions, something everyday folks never do. However, House of Representatives member Bello El-Rufai, who represents Kaduna North Federal Constituency and whose privileged position as the son of a former minister and governor should give him an insider perspective on why this practice happens, piqued my curiosity when he questioned it during a parliamentary debate in December last year. He quipped that since his boyhood every year's budget has featured new computers, cars, utensils, and furniture even when these items don't expire in a year. "We need to cut down on costs," he said. "The recurrent expenditure issue exists in every budget. Even as a young person like myself, I see that we budget for vehicles every

sanctum of power by reason of both birth and positional privilege has articulated a thought that had been hibernating in the minds of millions of Nigerians was liberating. It reassured many people that their gnawing doubts about the moral propriety of Nigeria's ritualized budgetary prodigality are not ill-informed or out of line.

I thought the speech would ignite a soul-searching national conversation about Nigeria's wasteful budgeting practices. However, it seems it didn't. If it did, I must have missed it. But let's face it. There are not many regular people on the face of this earth who change their cars, computers, utensils, etc. every year. Even wealthy people use these items for a few years before changing them. Why does a country whose governments routinely proclaim that they are too poor to be able to afford subsidizing the energy consumption of its struggling population spend stratospheric amounts of money to replenish one-year-old items for people in government every single year?

Each time I write about the immorality of visiting avoidable anguish on the Nigerian population through the

withdrawal subsidies, the standard retort I get from neoliberal apologists who care more about the happiness of the “markets” than they do about the health and vitality of the people is, “where do you want the government to get the money to pay for subsidies?” Well, how about from the same place where it gets the funds to change year-old items every year for government officials at the cost of billions of naira? Just because Bello El-Rufai raised this issue and his fellow politicians didn't shoot him down, at least to my knowledge, I got curious and researched what happens in other countries. It turns out most wealthy nations of the world (who, by the way, extend various kinds of subsidies to their vulnerable populations) don't replace cars, computers, and utensils every year as a matter of course. In the United States, the official vehicles of the president and the vice president are not replaced every year. In fact, “The Beast,” as the presidential limousines of U.S. presidents have been called since 2001, “have largely been on eight-year cycles for the past 30 years,” according to Autoweek.com.

government-provided vehicles for official duties. I also found that the replacement cycle for vehicles used by U.S. government agencies ranges from 3 to 5 years. The guidelines established by the General Services Administration (GSA), which manages the federal fleet, say sedans and light-duty vehicles should be changed every 3 to 5 years or after or after they rack up 60,000 to 75,000 miles, whichever comes first. Vans and trucks are changed every 5 to 7 years or 100,000 to 150,000 miles, whichever comes first. Law enforcement and emergency vehicles are replaced every 3 to 6 years or after recording between 50,000 to 80,000 miles, with replacements based on performance, reliability, and safety concerns.

What happens to government vehicles that get replaced? According to the General Services Administration (GSA), most government vehicles, once they reach the end of their service life, are sold to the public through GSA Auctions, which is the federal government's online auction platform. Auctions are open to individuals, businesses, and local governments.

But the vehicles can also be transferred to other government agencies or donated through programs like the Federal Surplus Personal



The most recent model of the presidential limousine was introduced in 2018. It replaced the previous version, which debuted in 2009 during President Barack Obama's administration. So, President Donald Trump doesn't have a brand new car. Although the official vehicles for the president and the vice president have an eight-year replacement cycle, they undergo periodic upgrades to incorporate the latest security features, including communications, armor, and defensive capabilities. That's more economical than buying brand new cars every year just for the sake of it. Members of the U.S. Congress (that is, members of the House of Representatives and the Senate) don't have funds specifically allocated to them for the purchase of official or personal cars. They only receive allowances and benefits that may cover travel-related expenses.

Most members of Congress don't buy cars. They instead opt to lease cars using their congressional office budget called “Representational Allowance” for House members and “Senate office funds” for Senators), and lease terms typically range from 2 to 4 years. That means they may switch vehicles periodically based on lease expiration. Only high-ranking Congressional officials (such as the Speaker and the Senate Majority Leader) or those facing security threats use

Property Donation Program, which provides assets to eligible non-profits, educational institutions, and local governments. Similarly, the replacement frequency of official vehicles for the UK Prime Minister and cabinet members is not yearly, as it is in Nigeria. Although change of cars for UK government officials is not governed by a fixed schedule as it is in the U.S., the Government Car Service (GCS), an executive agency of the Department for Transport, manages the fleet of vehicles assigned to cabinet ministers and other officials and determines when they need to be changed.

In sum, most wealthy nations of the world don't allocate funds every year for the replacement of non-perishable items used by government officials. It's a wasteful practice that should have no place in a struggling country like Nigeria. The funds allocated for the yearly needless replacement of cars, computers, utensils, etc. should instead be invested in programs and policies that bring relief to the people. I hope Bello El-Rufai will move beyond rhetoric and galvanize support for legislation that will enshrine a 5-year replacement cycle for items that are currently replaced every year in Nigerian budgets. He would write his name in gold if he did that.