

Will the National Assembly ever come clean?

By Bolanle Bolawole

Nigeria's second arm of government, the Legislature, is in the eye of the storm again! Tongues keep wagging the National Assembly basically on two issues that keep recurring. The first has to do with its salaries, allowances, emoluments and perquisites, which many believe are out of this world and out of tune with realities. The second is how effectively and diligently it has performed its oversight functions on the Executive arm of government. Many Nigerians are more concerned with the first than the second. Complaints about the humongous take-home of the National Assembly members have always been a sore point for Nigerians who cannot see what service the legislators are rendering to justify their huge pay. Besides, the country is said to be too poor to pay the law makers salaries that are far superior to what the developed countries and advanced democracies pay their own law makers. Hence, various derogatory names have been given to our senators and honourables, one of which is legislooters. With cries of "we are hungry" all over the place, the groundswell of opinion is that it cannot be business as usual for the National Assembly members. But rather than thaw, the coconut leaf of the legislators hardens furthermore. How can our leaders live life to a hilt while preaching to the generality of the people to tighten their belt and accept austerity measures? Why is it that what is good for the goose is not also good for the gander? The fire of controversy was stoked again by the revelation of a sitting senator that he earns N21m per month - and he is not even a principal officer! Which means that the principal officers must be earning every month something way ahead of that? A news medium reported the squealing senator thus: "The lawmaker representing Kano South, Senator Sumaila Kawu, has revealed that he earns over N21m monthly as a total take-home package. This revelation is coming barely 24 hours after the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission had said that each of the 109 senators in the upper chamber receives a total of N1.06m in salary and allowances per month. The RMAFC chairman, Mohammed Shehu, said this as a form of clarification in response to recent controversies over the real amount each lawmaker earns per month. Based on Shehu's disclosure, it would mean



each lawmaker earns N12.72m in 12 months and the Federal Government incurs a total expenditure of N1.4bn annually on all senators.

"A breakdown of their monthly earnings revealed that each Senator collects a monthly salary and allowances of N1,063,860, consisting of a basic salary of N168,866:70; motor vehicle fueling and maintenance allowance, N126,650:00; and personal assistant allowance, N42,216:66. Others include domestic staff, N126,650:00;

entertainment, N50,660:00; utilities, N50,660:00; newspapers/periodicals, N25,330:00; wardrobe, N42,216,66:00; house maintenance, N8,443.33:00; and constituency allowance, N422,166:66. "Shehu in the statement had noted, "The commission also wishes to use this opportunity to state that any allegation regarding other allowance(s) being enjoyed by any political (or) public office holder outside those provided in the Remuneration (Amendment) Act, 2008 should be explained by the person who made the allegation. To avoid misinformation and misrepresentation of facts capable of misleading citizens and members of the international community, the commission considers it most appropriate and necessary to request Nigerians and any other interested party to avail themselves of the opportunity to access the actual details of the present remuneration package for political, public and judicial office holders in Nigeria published on its website: www.rmafc.gov.ng.

"However, Senator Kawu... disclosed that although his monthly salary is about N1m, his total take-home was N21m, a wide margin from figures quoted by RMAFC". This was how a news medium reported the latest controversy over the recurring issue of the pay of National Assembly members. Who should we believe: The RMAFC purportedly fixing the salaries or the senator taking the salaries home? The scripture says "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established" (2 Corinthians 13:1). Kawu, who made the disclosure of N21m salary per month, is a sitting senator. The second witness we are calling here today is a former senator, Shehu Sani. Another news medium reported Sani thus: "Amid the controversy over the monthly earnings of federal lawmakers, Senator Shehu Sani has maintained

that he received N13 million as a member of the 8th Senate while current members of the 10th Senate receive N21 million monthly. The revelation by the former lawmaker, who represented Kaduna Central in the 8th Senate, followed the stance of the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) that Senators earn N1 million each. Sani... insisted that the RMAFC is being economical with the truth. "He said, 'I was a senator and I believe I had correct knowledge about what actually happened at that time and I believe (it) is what is (still) happening now. Well, RMAFC was just playing with figures, they were (not) specific in saying this is the salary of senators and then they went on to give a breakdown of N20 million, which they said was what every senator earns in four years. But I think they are being economical with the truth and I think I understand their fears in terms of telling the truth when they know what is actually happening... 'I was going through the papers and I saw a statement credited to one of the Senators from Kano, Distinguished Senator Kawu Ismaila, who confirmed what I said about senators, particularly of this set (10th Senate), receiving up to N21 million monthly. During my time, I was in the Senate and I was pricked by my conscience as an activist who went to the Senate to unveil what has been made secret for over two decades. I believe that taxpayers and Nigerians in general have the right to know how much their legislators are earning and how much they are actually being given. I went on

as a serving senator then to disclose what I received monthly, what was credited into my account at that time and it was N13.5 million'. "The former lawmaker said he does not believe there is any need to deceive Nigerians or cover up anything. He said since legislators receive public funds, it is necessary for those involved to come out and say it as it is". It remains now for us to hear from the horse's mouth, as they say. What is the Senate's response

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to these allegations? Its spokesperson, Yemi Adaramodu, was reported by another news medium thus: "The Nigerian Senate, has debunked reports that lawmakers in the upper chamber of the National Assembly receive ₦21 million monthly as salary and allowances. The Chairman, Senate Committee on Media and Public Affairs, Senator Adeyemi Adaramodu, made this clarification in a statement in Abuja. According to him, running costs, as mentioned by Senator Abdurrahman Kawu Sumaila, is not peculiar to the National Assembly, and neither is the mentioned amount a personal emolument for any senator. The explanation follows the disclosure by Sumaila, who represents Kano South senatorial district of Kano State in the National Assembly, that senators get ₦21 million monthly each as allowances and running costs....

"The disclosure generated fresh controversy over the earnings of Nigerian lawmakers amidst the allegation by former President Olusegun Obasanjo that members of the National Assembly fix bogus salaries and allowances for themselves in contravention of extant laws. However, Adaramodu said that "running cost" was quite different from the salary and personal allowances of the lawmakers. He explained that running cost is not personal to any lawmaker but (is) used for official purposes, such as maintaining lawmakers' constituency offices and staff, oversight functions and community engagements. "The

Senate spokesperson said the lawmakers do not engage in wasteful spending, explaining that: "The Nigerian Senate is an Assembly of accomplished and successful professionals, administrators and captains of industries who are not driven by these often-touted egregious pecuniary bits, rather (by) their patriotic zeal in the nation's quest to breathe life (into) Nigeria's political and socioeconomic dry bones'.

"Adaramodu said the Revenue Mobilization and Fiscal Allocation Commission (RMAFC) has already clarified and disclosed the monthly salary of lawmakers in the country and all other figures apart from what the commission declared should be ignored. 'For the umpteenth time, the Senate is compelled to react to the obsolete allegations of a phantom salary and personal emoluments spuriously credited to senators monthly. The Revenue Mobilization and Fiscal Allocation Commission, the agency of government that fixes political officials' salaries and allowances, has duly disclosed the monthly personal take-home of senators. However, all arms of Government and their personnel, Governors, Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Directors-General, State Commissioners, even Boards and parastatals, including local government councils, run their activities with running costs and the National Assembly is not an exemption. 'Thus, the money referred to by Senator Kawu Sumaila is neither his salary nor personal allowance. It's for the daily running of offices by senators and other attached statutory officials. It equally provides funds for constituency office staff. It is also for oversight functions and community engagements. This fund is not static and is provided for in the annual budget. Such funds are retired by relevant officers after being used for official purposes and proof of genuine expenditure (provided). It's not a personal allowance or salary of the legislator. 'The National Assembly receives about one per cent of the federal budget and has never exceeded this, even when the non-availability of funds (was not) pervasive. The Nigerian Senate is an Assembly of accomplished and successful professionals, administrators and captains of industries who are not driven by these oft-touted egregious pecuniary bits; rather, by their patriotic zeal in the nation's quest to breathe life into Nigeria's political and socioeconomic dry bones', he said".

From the above submissions made by Senator Sumaila Kawu, ex-Senator Shehu Sani and the Senate spokesperson Adeyemi Adaramodu, it can be deduced that the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission is the one that is being economical with the truth. Each senator's "take-home" of N21million per month, to adopt Senator Kawu's terminology, is light years ahead of the measly sum of N1.06 million being put forward by the RMAFC. Kawu and Shehu Sani's testimonies corroborate each other. They are eye witnesses and their accounts are authentic eye witness accounts. In fact, whatever we hear from them can be

taken as having been heard from the horse's mouth. They are witnesses of truth because they are beneficiaries of the humongous perquisites in issue and cannot be said to harbour malice or have sinister or ulterior motives to paint the Senate in bad light.

Besides, Adaramodu did not in any way debunk the assertions that the senators of the 10th Senate earn the N21 million or more that Kawu averred to; he only said the amount was not meant as personal salaries and allowances for senators. I have no problem understanding that. I also perfectly understand - and sympathize - with the National Assembly that while all eyes are trained on it, other arms and tiers of government such as agencies, ministries, departments and parastatals engage in similar or even worse corner-cutting and moonlighting with public funds than the legislators do but get away with blue murder in broad daylight. Why scapegoat the National Assembly, then; if you understand what we mean! They have a point there; don't you think?

But that there are similar or even bigger rogues elsewhere does not vitiate your own bad conduct! What the National Assembly should do to exculpate itself once and for all



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from its odious public image is to be open and transparent with its members' salaries and allowances, from the Senate president/Speaker of the House of Representatives to the principal officers and other members. As it is, all the allowances and salaries meant for this or that and funds for constituency activities may be what some senators and honourable members pull together and siphon into their own pocket, which should not be so. Until the National Assembly comes to the open and is transparent in its affairs, it will continue to carry the odious reputation of an insensitive arm of government and a cesspit of corruption. Worse for the Senate is the fact that the cantankerous, even childish, irresponsible and insensitive outbursts of its presiding officer has not helped matters at all!