

THE ROLE OF THE LEGISLATURE IN PREVENTING CORRUPTION AND BREACHES OF INTEGRITY IN THE JUSTICE SECTOR

Being a Paper presented at the All Nigeria Judges' Conference of Superior Courts held at Andrews Otutu Obaseki Auditorium, National Judicial Institute, Abuja on November 14th, 2023 by His Excellency, Distinguished Senator Godswill O. Akpabio, CON, President of the Senate, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Milords I extend to you all the greetings and warm wishes of my distinguished colleagues of the 10th Senate and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this very important subject that strikes at the very heart of our democracy, the foundation upon which our society rests – “Preventing Corruption and Breaches of Integrity in the Justice Sector, the Role of the Legislature”

Permit me at this juncture to also appreciate Milords enormously for your selfless service to our dear country. I am particularly elated because the judiciary has held things together in the nascent democracy of this country, always thriving to remain the last hope of the common man. I must say that even before the advent of the 4th Republic, it was a very bold and courageous judiciary that kept Nigeria within sane limits during our trying times as a nation. We remain grateful Milords.

In considering this topic, I am of the view that it is a topic of a profound significance and it has far reaching implications. It is more than a discourse; it is a clarion call to uphold the very essence of justice and fairness in our land and more importantly, restore the confidence of the people in the justice sector. The hallowed halls of our courts, where the rule of law is upheld, where justice is meant to be blind, fair and impartial, represent the bedrock of our democratic values. However, when an alleged corruption and breaches of integrity infiltrate this sector, the consequences are usually dire, undermining these core values and shaking the foundations of our nation.

I am first and foremost a lawyer before my adventure into politics and so I have a clear understanding of the real situation including institutional and legal bottlenecks that afflict the justice sector generally.

As a member of the legal profession, the President of the Senate and the chairman of the National Assembly, I humbly stand as the representative of the legislature and the people of Nigeria bearing a weighty responsibility in our collective endeavour to ensure that whatever are the causes of the alleged corruption and breaches of integrity in the justice sector, legislative interventions must be pursued vigorously for the purposes of elimination. This collective action-plan must be intentional to create a just, accountable and reliable justice system that serves the very best interest of every citizen.

Permit me Milords to address briefly the root causes of some of the issues afflicting the sector and let me proffer some of the proactive and strategic

legislative initiatives in contemplation which the 10th Assembly is prepared to undertake.

It has become a norm for every outgoing justices of the various courts to lament on some of the problems of the Judiciary which we all know beforehand before they say it. Some of these challenges manifest in various forms, eroding the fundamental tenets of Justice, impairing public trust, and hampering the sector's ability to function effectively.

In combatting the challenge of corruption and breaches of trust, the judiciary is not alone. Unlike during the military era, where the judiciary was a lonely civilian arm at the apogee of our governance, the judiciary now has the Legislature, being a signpost of democracy as a willing and capable partner towards a zero corruption threshold. We are your brother's keeper on this endeavour.

Our responsibility is to support with necessary legislative interventions that will disincentive the eagerness towards corruption, close gaps and minimize negative opportunities and strengthen the Judiciary to purge itself of its own bad eggs. But beyond this, we stand by the determination of the current administration of President Ahmed Bola Tinubu GCFR to ensure improvement in the welfare of our judges of all the various courts.

My noble lords, it is an aphorism that a hungry man is an angry man and an angry man is a devil's workshop. Our judicial officers are often burdened to resolve conflicts of monumental dimensions and yet, milords still struggle with mundane and trivial survival needs and work tools. This is a situation that is now exacerbated by the challenging economy that this

administration is battling with and which we are working very hard to improve upon. The legislature is determined to improve the judiciary through very intentional appropriations and we are going to work closely on this.

There is no better way to put it, we can only better strengthen the commitment of the judiciary to the rule of law and democracy by making this job worth its while for our Lords.

We are aware that the number of Justices on the bench of the Supreme Court has dropped drastically below the constitutional requirement. It is a matter of national interest that we immediately initiate the due process of law to address the shortfall at the apex court. In this wise, the Legislature is ready to play its role.

The Judiciary and the Legislature share a unique relationship. The legislature is the assembly of the people, while the judiciary is the people's last hope. We will always therefore seek to identify ways in which Parliament can help the judiciary to remain strong, productive and independent for the benefit of Nigeria. Stringent resource allocation, transparent and merit based appointments and removals are some of the measures that the legislature will entrench to assist the justice sector to regain its glory. Let it be known also that fostering a culture of integrity and accountability is achievable through continuous training of judicial officers on ethical standards and anti-corruption measures. Educating the public about their rights and the justice system's operations, enhancing

transparency in court proceedings and making legal processes more accessible and affordable are essential components.

The utilisation of technology to increase speed and transparency in court proceedings and case management reduces opportunities for corruption and breaches of integrity.

Of importance and which I should mention in this august event is the measures that this 10th Assembly will take to address the delay in justice delivery in Nigeria. We all know that justice delayed is justice denied. This has become a cankerworm that requires urgent solution. It is a truth that it takes average of 15 or 20 years to resolve simple business disputes in Nigeria. This is clearly unhealthy as it has placed the nation in a disadvantageous position in the 21st century. Therefore, urgent institutional and legal reforms are required to address this abnormally.

We in the national assembly are of the firm view that not every matter from the remotest village in Nigeria should end up at the Supreme Court in Abuja. Some of these cases are better stopped at the various court of appeals in the Federation if we are desirous of quicker dispensation of Justice.

Under contemplation therefore is a bill to address that absurdity. The bill will address the issue of some of the cases that will have its final bus stop at the court of appeal while the Supreme court should be burdened with only cases that the stakeholders have agreed should end up at the apex court. With these and other progressive measures we would have addressed the issue of delay in our justice sector in Nigeria.

In conclusion Milords, the taste of the pudding is in the eating. I cannot exhaust all the plans of legislative intervention in this paper at this conference. What I know is that our commitment to preventing corruption and upholding integrity within the justice sector is unwavering. We are prepared to take robust legislative measures to address the teething problems of our justice sector. With these interventions and strategic moves, the 10th Assembly is dedicated to enhancing the administration of justice and improving justice service delivery across the nation.

I solicit the support of the bench for us to strengthen the integrity and capacity of our judges through proactive legislative interventions. The consequence will be a judiciary that is perceived as fair, independent and justice- driven with improved positive perception by the members of the public.

I wish milords quality and successful deliberations in your conference.

Thank You.