Ndoma-Egba’s Twisted Logic

Contributed by Mike Akpan
Sunday, 24 July 2011

Most members of that Assembly, who were products of a corrupt and faulty electoral process, master-minded by Professor Maurice Iwu and his team in the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, thought they were in the national legislature to represent their personal interests rather than those of the people

It has never been in doubt that the Sixth National Assembly symbolised the dark side of Nigeria’s democratic history which is very painful to remember. Most members of that Assembly, who were products of a corrupt and faulty electoral process, master-minded by Professor Maurice Iwu and his team in the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, thought they were in the national legislature to represent their personal interests rather than those of the people. As one of them confided in a friend in 2008: “I spent a lot of money at both the party primaries and the National Assembly election. In fact, I had to sell my two houses in Lagos in order to pursue my electoral ambition. I was taking a high risk because it would have been suicidal for me if I had lost the election. I knew it was a gamble which could have gone either way. Since I was lucky to win the election, are you saying now that I should not look for ways to recoup my investment?” The above discussion typified the mentality of most members of the Sixth National Assembly which comprised 109 Senators and 360 members of the House of Representatives. They saw their election into either the Senate or the House as a political investment that should yield quick dividend thereafter. That was why most of the lawmakers abandoned their legislative duties in the first two years (2007-2009) to chase contracts in federal ministries, departments and agencies, MDAs, in the guise of performing oversight functions. The strategy they adopted to browbeat officials of the MDAs to dole out several millions of Naira to them was to set up meaningless probe panels and organise public sittings to expose alleged corrupt deals in the MDAs. One of such probe panels was set up by the House Committee on Power and Steel, headed by Ndudi Elumelu, to investigate how $16 billion was allegedly wasted in the energy sector by former President Olusegun Obasanjo without anything to show. As it turned out, Elumelu, Mohammed Jibo, his deputy committee chairman, Paulinus Igwe, chairman House Committee on Rural Development and Nicholas Ugbane, chairman, Senate Committee on Power and Steel, used the probe of the energy sector as a platform through which they got involved in a N6 billion rural electrification project contract scam in the Rural Electrification Agency, REA. The four lawmakers, along with eight officials of the REA, are currently being prosecuted at an Abuja high court by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, in connection with the contract scam. Apart from abuse of the power to carry out oversight functions in MDAs, some federal lawmakers were also accused of openly demanding bribes from ministries, departments and agencies as a condition for their budget allocations to be approved or even increased. That explains why the National Assembly made it a habit to be increasing the annual federal budgets beyond implemental level. By May 2009, the near-zero performance of the National Assembly, two years after its inauguration, became very worrisome. The negative impact of the ugly development on the country prompted the late President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua to formally write to the leadership of the two chambers of the National Assembly to express his worry. In the letter dated May 11, 2009, Yar’Adua specifically accused the federal lawmakers of idleness. He said because of their idleness, only one Bill- the 2009 Appropriation Bill, had been passed as at then. According to the president, only four Bills were passed in 2008, one of which was “Certain Political and Judicial Office Holders (Salaries and Allowances etc.) Amendment Bill 2008.” The Bill received priority treatment because it needed the approval of the National Assembly for a new welfare package worked out by the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission, RMAFC,for political and judicial office holders to come into effect. Despite the mouth-watering salaries, allowances and fringe benefits which RMAFC worked out for political and judicial office holders and which were not based on the prevailing economic reality of the country, the lawmakers still went behind the commission and secretly approved an additional welfare package for themselves. The economic implication of the bloated welfare package was that the cost of maintaining unproductive legislators took more than 25 percent of the recurrent allocation in the federal budget every year. Consequently, the self-centredness of members of the Sixth National Assembly created a negative public image for that arm of government in Nigeria. Surprisingly, Victor Ndoma-Egba, Senate leader, representing Cross River Central, has rationalised the growing negative public perception of the National Assembly in Nigeria as a universal development. In other words, he does not see anything wrong with it. In a lecture titled: “The Nigerian Legislature: Reconnecting with the Public and Challenges of Perception” in Abuja, the senator argued that negative public perception of the legislature is not peculiar to Nigeria. According to him: “When I was researching for this paper, I tried to find out which legislature is popular with the people of the world and there is not one. Not one legislature is popular… A legislature is an institution full of contradictions… Parliaments worldwide are unpopular institutions. Each time the legislature is criticised, democratic values are questioned.” I disagree with that twisted logic. The distinguished senator has got it all wrong. A parliament is only unpopular when it is disconnected from the people as was the case with the Sixth National Assembly. Again, democratic values are not questioned by criticisms but by the attitude of the lawmakers when they fail to realise that they hold a delegated mandate and are expected to serve the interest of the people rather than their personal interests. SMS: 08023880068