

viewpoint



Buccaneers as statesmen

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I have always advocated a full-scale socio-political restructuring of Nigeria. The reason is simple. Unless we do, we will daily, to our collective peril, be confronted with all the tragic fallout of a dysfunctional nation-state, be it the desire to “#BringBackOurGirls” or what Akin Osuntokun, writing in *Thisdaylive.com* (June 4, 2014), described as the “Akpabio Syndrome”.

Godswill Akpabio is the Governor of Akwa Ibom State, one of the richest states in Nigeria. Akwa Ibom’s wealth and survival, like that of all the states in the country, come mainly from the quarterly payments from the sale of crude oil that runs into billions of naira.

A notorious spendthrift, Akpabio has always been a newsmaker, and lately, for his attempt to secure for himself and his family a sumptuous retirement benefit. Apart from the senseless carnage by Boko Haram and the inability of government to confront the security challenge, nothing has attracted greater public outcry in the last one month than Akpabio’s antics.

When the online newspaper site, *premiumtimesng.com*, broke the news that Akpabio had sent a bill – the Akwa Ibom State Governors and Deputy Governors Pension Law 2014, which provides a generous pension and gratuity, including houses, upkeep of aides, cars and N100m annual medical payment, for life, for a former governor and his spouse – to the state House of Assembly, my initial reaction was that commonsense would prevail considering the current mood

of the country.”

For a moment, I forgot that our rulers are modern-day buccaneers; that the oversight role of the national and state assemblies which our brand of democracy purports to uphold is nothing but a ruse; that, as one writer put it, our democracy is not a “government of the people, by the people, for the people; but rather, a government by some people, for some people and for the benefit of some people.

It didn’t take long before Akpabio’s bill was passed into law. Weeks later, the governor was back at the state assembly, after much public outrage, to instruct his lawmakers – yes his lawmakers, for whatever Akpabio wants, Akpabio gets, no matter how odious – to expunge the “obnoxious” sections of the new law.

There is really nothing “obnoxious” about Akpabio’s law. In fact, “Akwa Ibomites” ought to be grateful to Akpabio. He has done them a world of good.

As the governor’s chief press secretary, Mr. Anietie Ukpe, explained: “The law has been there. What the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly did was just to create a ceiling. The law said former governors were entitled to maids but did not add a ceiling, which meant that a former governor could get a maid with a doctorate and be paying the individual N10m.

“The former provision stipulated that the governor and deputy governor would be entitled to medical treatment; the bill did not specify the limit to the amount these individuals could access. The governor could access up to N1bn for his medical bill, but with the amended law of 2014, medical expenses

have been restricted to N100m a year.”

Yes, we should be grateful to Akpabio. History will certainly vindicate him as he rightly noted in a tawdry response to critics; after all, “The ceiling, which was pegged at N100m per annum for former governors and N50m per annum for former deputy governors, was never meant to be given either in part or in whole to anybody at any time for any reason. It was meant to be paid to health institutions involved in the treatment of the former governors or former deputy Governors and their spouses.”

Akpabio has gone ahead to instruct that “a medical insurance scheme be put in place for the authentic and proper management of the medical treatment of former governors and deputy governors and their spouses in order to ensure that the open-ended nature of the law is not abused.”

Of course, Akpabio doesn’t get it. Because he is blinded by the feeling of entitlement, the common trait of our rulers, he can’t understand why an executive governor would not retire to a life of super comfort to the detriment of the mass of the people.

Regrettably, Mr. “Uncommon Transformation”, this is not about the “open-ended” nature or placing a “ceiling” on a law. It is about an obnoxious, anti-people law. Consider how many schools and hospitals the N5m per month for domestic servants – never mind the N100m annual medical payment – would build in a year in a state where the minimum wage is officially N21,000 per month; that’s for those who are employed!

How many domestic servants does Akpabio feel he is entitled to at the expense of Akwa Ibom taxpayers after he leaves office?

Will these domestic servants be expatriates? Is the N100m going to be paid to health institutions in Germany or India where Akpabio will certainly go to if he does fall sick?

If we strip Akpabio’s law of its legal veneer, what is left is barefaced banditry. Of course, he is not alone. Whether we are talking about the ruling Peoples Democratic Party or the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress; whether Akwa Ibom, Kwara, Lagos, Rivers, Borno, Gombe or Kano State, there is a collective desire by Nigeria’s ruling elite to mortgage the future of Nigerians.

And it’s not just about our governors. Not long ago, we were regaled with tales of how the outgone governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Lamido Sanusi, doled out billions of naira to any cause he fancied in the name of corporate social responsibility. Heads of government agencies and other categories of public officers send their girlfriends, concubines and family members, including nannies and other domestic aides, on vacation abroad, from their annual allocation.

We remember the case, a few years ago, of the “honourable” Minister of Education, Sam Egwu, who hosted a birthday party in Abuja with the “support” of the Ministry of Education, reportedly for more than N120m, to celebrate his 55th birthday and 25th wedding anniversary, at a time university teachers were on strike over the scandalous neglect of our universities.

It is good that the civil society is gearing up for legal action against Akpabio, and other governors and public officials that have criminally set indiscriminate pension and out-of-office emoluments for themselves.

While we are at it, our outrage should go deeper; for a system that nourishes the Akpabio Syndrome is simply not sustainable!

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