

NIGERIANS waited for so long to get the public declaration of assets of President Muhammadu Buhari and when it came two weeks ago via a press statement by Garba Shehu, his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, it left much to be desired.

If President Buhari made a false start by not declaring his assets publicly the day he was sworn in on May 29, 2015, he double-faulted with his "public" declaration two weeks ago. For a regime that came to power promoting probity and accountability, I think President Buhari and his handlers did a disservice to open government.

The statement by the Presidency on the assets of President Buhari and Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo, as declared to the Code of Conduct Bureau, was long on sophistry and short on details; what it revealed was interesting, what it failed to say essential. According to Shehu, "Documents submitted by President Muhammadu Buhari to the Code of Conduct Bureau show that the retired General has indeed been living an austere and Spartan lifestyle, contrary to what many might expect of a former Head of State of Nigeria and one who has held a number of top government positions, such as governor, minister of petroleum and the head of the Petroleum Development Trust Fund.

"The documents submitted to the CCB, which officials say are still being vetted and will soon be made public, show that prior to being sworn in on May 29, President Buhari had less than N30m to his name. He also had only one bank account, with the Union Bank. President Buhari had no foreign account, no factory and no enterprises. He also had no registered company and no oil wells. President Buhari declared however that he had shares in Berger Paints, Union Bank and Skye Bank. This is entirely unlike what one might expect from a former Head of State of a country like Nigeria.

"The documents also revealed that President Buhari had a total of five homes, and two mud houses in Daura. He had two homes in Kaduna, one each in Kano, Daura and in Abuja. One of the

# When public declaration of assets falls short

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mud houses in Daura was inherited from his late older sister, another from his late father. He borrowed money from the old Barclays Bank to build two of his homes. President Buhari also has two undeveloped plots of land, one in Kano and the other in Port Harcourt. He is still trying to trace the location of the Port Harcourt land.

"In addition to the homes in Daura, he has farms, an orchard and a ranch. The total number of his holdings in the farm includes 270 heads of cattle, 25 sheep, five horses, a variety of birds and a number of economic trees. The documents also showed that the retired General uses a number of cars, two of which he bought from his savings and the others supplied to him by the Federal Government in his capacity as a former Head of State. The rest were donated to him by well wishers after his jeep was damaged in a Boko Haram bomb attack on his convoy in July 2014.

"As soon as the CCB is through with the process, the documents will be released to the Nigerian public and people can see for themselves," Shehu's statement concluded.

I sympathise with Shehu. For a man who promised so much and from whom much is expected, President Buhari needed to be painted in the brightest of colours using his "modest" asset declaration. It does appear, however, that his media aide wants his statement to be the end of discussion on this issue even though he says the assets will be made public "as soon as the CCB is through with the process." And he may have succeeded. Or how else can one explain the hysteria that gripped not just the media, but the civil society so-called, that was in the forefront of the quest for the President to honour his campaign promise?

Here are the matters arising from President Buhari's "public" asset declaration debacle. If the President plans to go the whole nine yards,

why tease us? We need to know the President's liabilities, if any, the source of money, income from property, total value of his assets and those of his wife and children under 18 years, etc.

There is a danger in the Buhari model. As if taking a cue, less than 48 hours after he "publicly" declared his assets, the senator representing Kaduna Central, Shehu Sani, also "publicly" declared his assets. Sani declared "two wives and six children, a bank balance of N22m, seven houses in Kaduna, Abuja, Niger and Katsina states, several vehicles, two uncompleted office apartments in Kaduna; N5m in shares bought in 2007, 30 books published in Nigeria, the United States and the United Kingdom with royalties; and a community journal titled, *Peace Magazine*."

Expectedly, the "Teflon Senate President," Bukola Saraki, will soon make his assets "public" following the example of President Buhari.

It is understandable if President Buhari feels a bit irritated and wants to bully his way out of public asset declaration. But he should remember he brought this upon himself. Nobody forced him to commit, during his campaign, to declare his assets publicly. After all, we have seen distinguished and executive scoundrels across the country who have taken refuge in the law on this issue. It is their prerogative!

Last week, the President told journalists in Accra, Ghana, that he had declared his assets four times since 1975 and challenged them to investigate and dig up the records of his various declarations using the requisite law. "I have declared my assets and all that I have four times, and you (the media) have the right to go and demand for my declaration. Instead, I am being harassed," President Buhari was quoted as saying.

I hope President Buhari was not expecting Nigerians to clap in adulation for his quadruple asset declarations. The President was only doing what the law required of him as a public officer.

If he occupies public office 1,000 times, he has to declare his assets 1,000 times.

As a journalist, I am more interested in the President invoking the notion of investigative journalism. For the sake of profession and country, this is one challenge the media should take seriously. For example, it will be interesting to see what President Buhari declared at various stages of his public service vis-à-vis his latest declaration and his job and income during the same period.

Of course, the issue is not as simple as President Buhari presented it. That is why this is as much about him as it is about institutions. We know full well that if we invoke all the laws of the country, including the Constitution and the Freedom of Information Act, the CCB will not act unless it understands the body language of the President.

I don't think anybody is seeking to "lynch" President Buhari over his assets, but what is worth doing is worth doing well. If I am not mistaken, when former President Umaru Yar'Adua declared his assets publicly on June 28, 2007, a month after he was sworn in, he presented his liabilities, the value of all his assets (including household furniture) and those of his wife as well as sources of money.

We must appreciate the apprehension of Nigerians. Ours is a nation desirous of real heroes and heroines, one in which existential confidence is perhaps at an all-time low, in part because of the banditry of past rulers. Former President Goodluck Jonathan was forthright enough to tell us that he did not "give a damn" about asset declaration, confirming what many - apologies to Garba Shehu - expected of him as President of a country like Nigeria: the wholesale looting of the treasury!

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