

viewpoint



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Her Excellency, Madam President

If there was any doubt that she is in charge of the country, it was dispelled last week with what could easily pass as a “presidential address” by Her Excellency, Dame (Dr.) Patience Faka Jonathan.

I take issue with the way the First Lady of the Federal Republic has carried herself since a combination of good luck and political intrigue brought her to power as First Lady three years ago.

From being the inconspicuous wife of a vice-president whose main job was not remarkable, Mrs. Jonathan has grown to the most powerful First Lady in the history of Nigeria and she is blithely usurping the power of the President.

When the First Lady is more visible and vocal than the President, then something is wrong. We thought we had it bad with Turai Yar'Adua. While the late Umaru Yar'Adua was snoozing at the Presidency, his wife and her cabal ran amok, almost imperilling the country. When that grotesque absurdity came to an end in May 2010, Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief. Little did they know that they would look at the Turai Yar'Adua era with palpable nostalgia.

Of course, like all power-besotted individuals, it is easy for the First Lady to attribute her power and position to some divine force. And that was exactly what she did last week when she gathered some “men and women of God” led by Bishop God-do-well Awomapara for a state visit at the Presidential Villa. Well, it looked like “God-did-well” for his faithful servants at the end of the circus.

A few months ago, when Mrs. Jonathan returned from her extended hospitalisation in Germany for an undisclosed illness, she told us that she had been to the great beyond and back. We were expecting “a new improved” and sober First Lady. If we expected that experience to “teach her any lessons”, it clearly did not.

Rather, the First Lady has thrown herself into the political fray, bestriding the political landscape like a colossus and committing one political faux pas after another with relish. Of course, as a Nigerian, the First Lady has interests. And there is nothing wrong in seeking to advance those interests. But that desire has to be channelled through her husband, her elected representatives or relevant public office holders.

When Nigerians voted for Goodluck Jonathan, they did not vote for him and his wife. Mrs. Jonathan was not on the ballot box during the last general elections. That is the tough lesson the First Lady has to learn and quickly too. It is sad enough that we have to live with the quirks of a rudderless Presidency; to add the inanities and meddlesomeness of the First Lady is undoubtedly “double wahala”.

You can't but pity Nigeria. Anyone who saw Mrs. Jonathan in her imperial majesty and splendour on the *Nigerian Television Authority* last week reading the riot act to Nigerians on how to be good citizens and followers would be pardoned if she was mistaken for the President and Commander-in-Chief. The audacity is obvious. She can be a messiah or saviour to those who are in search of earthly messiahs and saviours, (One Evans Bipi even called her his “Jesus Christ”) but for goodness sake, as a nation,

we do not deserve this contempt for decency. Jonathan and her Dame have taken this side-show that passes for governance too far.

Now is the time to curtail the paternalistic bravado of the First Lady. The “mummy culture” that allows the First Lady to arrogate to herself the role of “Mother of the nation” which makes every Nigerian a daughter or son, no matter how old or highly placed, is patently undemocratic.

Reuben Abati, then chairman of the editorial board of *The Guardian* and now spokesperson for the President and his First Lady, was right when he wrote about Mrs. Jonathan's three years ago. “Many of our compatriots, particularly persons in positions of privilege and authority confuse this – the freedom to be free – with the right to be disagreeable”, Abati noted. “The truth is that democracy is about rights and responsibilities, a democratic dispensation therefore cannot be a licence for disagreeable conduct as a norm; just as the possession of power in any form does not guarantee the right to be reckless or to ignore the etiquette required of office holders”.

We know where Abati is eating from today and his current position on the meddlesomeness of the First Lady, but that does not vitiate his point. “When people suddenly find themselves in a such position (as Mrs. Jonathan found herself in May 2010), prepared or unprepared, anywhere in the world, they are taken through a crash programme in finishing and poise”, Abati wrote three years in reference to the First Lady and her shenanigans during a visit to her hometown in Okrika, Rivers State.

What a difference three years make! I am not sure the First Lady has taken the crash programme Abati recommended three years ago. Which is why she has failed to

realise, in the words of Abati, “that being the wife of an important man comes with serious responsibilities lest (you) sabotage the same person that (you) should be supporting”.

Mrs. Jonathan is consciously or unconsciously sabotaging President Jonathan. The President may decide not to act for reasons best known to him. But as Abati noted, “The Jonathans must be told that Nigeria does not have a co-Presidency. We have only one president and his name is Goodluck Ebele Jonathan”.

From Abati, we learnt that, “Under the Jonathan presidency, Dame Patience Jonathan even got a special allocation in the original budget for the 2010 Golden Jubilee anniversary whereas she has no official, financial reporting responsibilities! The international standard is that spouses in these circumstances must not only appear but be seen to be above board like Caesar's wife. They must not misbehave like Marie Antoinette”.

It is appalling that the Senators of the Federal Republic, led by Ahmed Rufai Sani Yerima, voted to keep a section of the constitution which is not only discriminatory but puts the female child at the risk of early marriage and abuse and there hasn't been as much as a whimper from the First Lady, the so-called Mother of the nation.

Yerima and the First Lady appear to have something in common. While the apostle of child-bridge – whose children would likely be in elite schools outside Nigeria – seeks to undermine the secularity of the country and imperil the future of our children, our omnipresent First Lady has assumed powers not known to the constitution.

Please, “Madam President”, listen to the wise counsel of Abati. Do not push your Goodluck!