

JUMBO PAY FOR NIGERIAN LAWMAKERS: EMEKA ANYOKU'S "ATOMIC BOMB"

IT was President Barack Obama of the United states of America, who in his usual profound sense of oratory and appreciation of humanity and governance, stated in Ghana, in 1999 that: "History is not just made because we are powerful, financially rich and brute but for the change we bring to the well being of our community and society at large. We don't need powerful individuals but powerful institutions". On the eve of the inauguration of President Muhammadu Buhari, a gala night was organised in his honour by the then outgoing President Goodluck Jonathan at the State House, Abuja.

Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the experienced former Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations, was at his best. All the words in his speech were stylishly pronounced. He was very audible. He eulogised to the extreme, the former President for that singular show of sportsmanship and love for his country, by congratulating his opponent, even before the result was announced. He also profusely congratulated President Buhari for his election and his tenacity in trying repeatedly over the years, to be President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, until success smiled at him.

Then Anyoku spoke glowingly about Nigeria, his land of birth, on her many achievements and myriad of challenges. He delivered his words diplomatically but with every punch he could muster. He spoke about the new mantra - corruption - at every facet of our political life and how the world sees Nigeria. He talked about his country where power is a big headache. He told the world that even at that, Nigeria 'prides' herself as having the highest paid lawmakers in the world. And that means that the Nigerian lawmaker earns more than his counterpart in the United States, China, Britain, Japan, Canada et al? In these countries, their light will hardly blink. In these countries, monthly statistical information about number of jobs created is a serious campaign issue.

You hear about 'Obamanomics', 'Romnomics'. We will soon hear about 'Clintonomics' and 'Bushnomics' towards 2016 polls in the United States. Serious debates as to how best to better the lot of the common man are commonplace. So what is special about Nigeria and her lawmakers? Do Nigerian lawmakers hold their plenaries in the moon? When Anyoku dropped his 'bomb,' I saw our leaders turning their heads left and right, and talking to themselves. They seemed to be saying, "This is not the place and time for this kind of comments, and whoever recommended that Anyaoku should give the keynote address this evening, did a bad job. He must be mischievous."

Surely, it was a hit at their conscience. It was a hit at their innermost recesses. They were visibly embarrassed. But there are some lawmakers with good conscience who will be willing to support President Buhari if he summons the political courage to address this outrageous package for the National Assembly (NASS) people. These selfless ones must be worried about the quantum of the nation's resources they cart away in the name of salaries and allowances in a country, where millions of young graduates roam the streets, clutching their A4 envelopes and files containing their credentials and searching for non-available jobs; where state governments are unable to pay salaries and some very proud to say they are owing just for few months; where for eight years the road connecting my great community in a capital territory, to the state capital, a distance of less than five kilometres, remains perpetually under construction and laneless to date; where getting electricity remains a luxury; where three square meals remain a mirage for many Nigerians; And where fuel scarcity in a land of plenty of oil bites relentlessly.

But that is about good conscience and those who have it. That is about selflessness. That is about service to one's country. That is a fine attitude towards this journey of life and its transience - driven by a good sense of humanity. But it does appear that in our country, good conscience is rare among politicians. They think more about themselves. They think about being "powerful individuals" and not about having "powerful institutions", to borrow Obama's words. And that is why some are ready to do just anything to get to that height - including visiting Okija Shrine in Anambra State. Politics is business, some have said. And so election is war.

Some kill. Some maim. Excess here and nothing at all there. And they don't care a hoot about that. What to do? When one reads that the salary and allowances of the average senator are N240m and that of his counterpart in the House of Representatives is N204m, the heart bleeds. For doing what? For inventing what? When did law-making become rocket science? And even if it is, so what? Believe you me, there are more than 10 million Nigerians, to be modest, who can do that job. And that is for a fact. Nigeria has great talents, great scholars and great minds who can do that job for a third of that sum. And we are all complacent? We are all watching and complaining in the comfort of our homes that the nation's source of income has plummeted?

We are all watching and crying to high heavens that oil price has dropped and still dropping dreadfully and worrisomely? Why must we watch helplessly, as

senior citizens who have served this nation in their prime, cry out for their monthly peanuts in the name of pension? In some climes, the uncompromised human right activists, the labour unions, the religious and public-spirited individuals will speak out and even lead peaceful demonstrations to send a message to the NASS people that this is unacceptable. President Buhari has an opportunity to make history in this regard. He should not be scared of stepping on seemingly powerful toes. Buhari remaining in office does not necessarily reside in the NASS. His fate is in the hands of Nigerians who elected him. That also applies to the lawmakers themselves. Buhari is rendered almost impotent because he has fast-dwindling source of funds to operate with. And yet the Naira is flying in the air, everywhere in the National Assembly.

The President, should as a matter of serious national interest, employ all known political and administrative wizardry to save some money from the jumbo pay of the NASS members. He must continue to 'belong to everybody' and 'belong to nobody', to use his lines. He must appeal to them to imbibe the sense of sacrifice. Anyaoku has passed the ball to him. Buhari has an open net before him. His is to score the goal. And now, is the time. Nigeria needs powerful institutions. Not powerful individuals. • Asianah wrote from Port Harcourt.