

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WATCH

**(A twice-monthly focus on Nigeria's National Assembly.
Period ending October 27, 2012)**

Reps promise all-inclusive process to review Constitution:

From far away Quebec, Canada, came a promise by Nigeria's House of Representatives to ensure that citizens are carried along in the process of considering the amendments to the country's Constitution.

Media reports quote the Deputy Speaker of the House, Rep. Emeka Ihedioha (PDP, Imo) as making the pledge to journalists during the 127th assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). He said unlike the practice of limiting the consultations to clusters of events in six geo-political zones, the House plans to have consultations in each of the 360 federal constituencies. This would certainly be an opportunity to deepen discussions on the amendment more than what the Senate plans to do.

Rep. Ihedioha argued that to limit the discussion to just six zones is to give opportunity to the political class and the vocal elite to assert their agenda as the dominant one and thus fence out the views of majority of Nigerians.

He promised further that the debates would be "no-holds barred, non-partisan and broad-based" and that the National Assembly would not limit the number of possible amendments.

If the plan scales through, it would be a great step in taking the constitution review process closer to the people but what would be more important is to see the 360 representatives truly open up those consultative fora to the ordinary citizens that Ihedioha envisages. This is because currently, the country provides resources to every legislator to operate 'constituency offices' in their local areas for the purpose of having consultations with a wide spectrum of their constituents. Many of those constituency offices, where they are established, hardly function optimally or effectively.

It is also imperative now for citizens groups to begin to mobilize to be able to engage the process when it commences soon.

Senate President promises protection for Bakassi people:

It was not only the House of Representatives that made a promise to Nigerians from Quebec, Canada. Senate President David Mark was equally at the same event and used the opportunity to assure the people of Bakassi of protection despite the final loss of the territory to Cameroon.

Senator Mark, according to media reports, said Nigeria's National Assembly, which he heads, was making efforts to work with the Cameroonian parliament to ensure the protection of the rights of Bakassi people, who have now become immigrants in their land, which is now under Cameroonian territory.

While the details of such proposed collaboration are not yet known, it would be important for both countries to involve the actual victims of the current situation, not just the political and elite class that has over the years appropriated the advantages accruable to the area.

Another senator accused of 'Boko Haram' links:

Would consanguine relationship be enough reason to link a person to a terror group? What about the arrest of a terror group member in the house of a close relation or associate?

Those are some of the issues the security operatives are trying to resolve after their recent arrest of one Shuaib Bama, an alleged commander of the terror group, Boko Haram in Maiduguri, reportedly in the house of Senator Ahmed Zanna (PDP, Borno).

Senator Zanna, although admitting that the arrested person is his nephew, insists the arrest was not made in his (Senator) house but the house of his political rival, a former senator and former governor of Borno State, Ali Modu Sheriff.

The senator further accused the security operatives of extra-judicial killings and collusion with Ali Sheriff to implicate him.

But while investigation is on-going, Senator Zanna has offered to lead the Federal Government's delegation to negotiate with the terror group.

Senator Zanna is the second senator, after Senator Ali Ndume (also from Borno) to be linked to the group by security agencies. Ndume is in fact still standing prosecution for the alleged link.

Reps may amend National Honours Act:

The yearly widespread citizens' criticisms of the list of honourees for Nigeria's National Awards may be mitigated if the proposed amendments to the Act and processes scale through.

The amendment, sponsored by minority leader, Rep Femi Gbajabiamila (ACN, Lagos) seeks certain reforms including the limitation of the number of recipients per year to 100 and publication of the proposed recipients list for at least two months prior to the award, within which period members of the public would be allowed to raise objections and substantiate them against any nominee.

The amendment also seeks to raise the qualification for the selection from being that of distinguished public service to extraordinary achievements in public and private service. Many members who spoke on the bill blamed the application of 'quota system' and 'federal character principle' as some of the factors responsible for the proliferation of the national honours.

Rep Gbajabiamila argued that the honours conferred by the National Honours belonged to the Nigerian people and even when they are conferred by the president, the president only does so on behalf of all citizens, hence the need for citizens' involvement in the process.

The bill has since passed the second reading and has been committed to the House Committee on Governmental Affairs. It is expected that the committee would provide an opportunity for citizens' input to the amendment and that civil society would also mobilize to bring their perspectives to bear in this amendment.

House considers daytime restriction of heavy duty vehicles from roads:

The House of Representatives has asked its committees on justice and road safety to carry out work on a bill seeking to restrict articulated vehicles from running on the roads between 6:00 am and 6:00pm.

National Assembly to resolve oil benchmark figures as budget passes second reading:

With the Senate setting of the benchmark price of \$78 per barrel of oil, the stage is set for a tripartite negotiation with the House of Representatives and eventually the executive arm of government. Recall that the executive in presenting the medium term expenditure framework (MTEF) fixed \$75 as price per barrel of crude oil but the House of Representatives set it at \$85.

Senate's settlement for the \$78 benchmark was based on its consideration of the report of its joint Committees on Finance, and National Planning, Economic Affairs and Poverty Alleviation.

The crude oil benchmark price is the basis for the computation of the budget, the proposal of which the two chambers of the National Assembly are currently considering having been presented earlier in the month by President Goodluck Jonathan.

The benchmark price defines every other figures in the budget. In the event there is a sale of crude oil above that price, the amount of the excess, which was not budgeted for then forms the so-called 'excess crude oil proceeds', which by the letters of the Constitution must be shared based on the approved revenue sharing formula monthly. Not having been previously budgeted, it could also boost corruption and squandering by the three tiers of government. It was to solve this problem that the government set up the Sovereign Wealth Fund to draw from this excess. But many experts and commentators believe that despite the good intention of such a fund, it requires the amendment of the Constitution to be legitimate.

On the reverse side, should the crude oil sell below the benchmark, the country's budget would run into difficulties for under-budgeting, requiring other sourcing, supplementary appropriation or cut in spending.

That is why the Senate and the House of Representatives are expected to speedily convene a conference committee of both houses to reach an agreement on the figure. After such resolution, it would then be another round of negotiations with the executive on the amount to be set.

Meanwhile, both chambers of the national Assembly have taken the second readings of the Appropriation Bill and committed it to committees for further actions, just as members expressed more concerns with the implementation of the budget, when passed.

New senator takes seat:

About three months after the death of Senator Gyang Dangtong, his replacement through by-election, Gyang Nyam Pwajok, has been sworn in to fill the Plateau North Senatorial District seat. Like the late senator, the replacement is also of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Until his election, Pwajok was the chief of staff to the Plateau State governor.

Senators donate to flood victims:

Touched by the widespread flooding across the country with devastating effects to livelihood, the senators resolved previous week to donate between N200,000 (by regular members) and N300,000 (by principal officers) to the victims. This should add up to N62.8million.

Senate raises punishment for terrorism:

As a reaction to the growing acts of terrorism in the country, the Senate has passed an amendment of the Anti-terrorism Bill stipulating life jail as the maximum punishment for offenders.

The Senate equally approved the coordination of security operations under the Act by the Office of the National Security Adviser (NSA).

The passage of the bill followed the adoption of the report of the joint committees on National Security and Intelligence, Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Matters and Drugs, Narcotics, Financial Crimes and Anti-Corruption, headed by Senator Mohammed Magoro (PDP, Kebbi).

The amendment however is subject to concurrence by the House of Representatives and eventual assent by the President of the federation.

Is the Farouk Lawan case over?

Questions are still being asked nearly two month after the House of Representatives' resumption, what has happened to the 'celebrated' case involving Rep Farouk Lawan (PDP, Kano) and businessman, Femi Otedola who accused him of corruption.

Otedola claimed he was pressured by Lawan to pay a bribe of \$620,000 to the lawmaker to secure a clean bill from the House on an alleged involvement in petroleum subsidy scam while Lawan said he only collected the money (on Otedola's insistence) in order to expose the businessman for corruption.

As at the time of going on recess, the matter was stalemated because, after a committee of the House questioned Lawan in private, Otedola refused to have a private session with the committee, insisting on a public hearing.

Many citizens look forward to a speedy conclusion of this matter, but that doesn't seem feasible now, even as there is no information that security and the law enforcement agencies are doing anything about the matter.

This would go down as one in a long list of 'celebrated' corruption allegations involving the National Assembly, which fizzles out or gets overshadowed when another controversy erupts, no thanks to many citizens' apparent short memory, when it comes to matters of public interest.

