

*SPECIAL ADDRESS ON THE FIRST
ANNIVERSARY OF THE 8TH SENATE OF THE
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY*

By

SENATOR (DR.) ABUBAKAR BUKOLA SARAOKI

*President of the Senate, and
Chairman of the National Assembly
Federal Republic of Nigeria*

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1. Distinguished colleagues; one year ago today, the 8th Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was inaugurated. That inauguration marks a further consolidation of our democracy and opens a new chapter in the practice of government by representation in our country.
2. Let me congratulate all of us, not only for the time we have spent here, but also for all that we have achieved together and all that we have planned to achieve for our peoples and our country as the highest legislative body in the land. Let me thank you all distinguished Senators for your patriotism, for the courage you have demonstrated and for all the hard work we have put into making this Senate a true bastion of our young democracy.
3. On behalf of all the Senators, I will also like to thank members of our various constituencies for the abiding support we have enjoyed over the past one year. We want to assure all across the length and breadth of our country that we are fully committed to continue representing your various and collective interests and aspirations.
4. Every generation of Senators will face its peculiar challenges. The

task we set for ourselves and our understanding of our roles as Senators must therefore, reflect a robust understanding of the challenges that we face as a law making body at this time in our history.

5. The successful democratic transition that ushered in a new administration last year has re-ignited the hope of our citizens that democratic government truly empowers the people and is therefore ultimately capable of delivering real benefits to them and give them better quality of life. One year after, this remains the most important aspiration of our people: to be better off than they were in the previous year. Invariably, this must remain the most important priority of government: How do we make our people better off than they were before we came into office? This question, placed in the context of unprecedented decline in government revenue, underlines the economy and security as the two biggest issue of our time.

6. This Senate understands this obvious challenge. And this is why the Legislative Agenda of the 8th Senate is anchored on three cardinal objectives of improving governance, improving business and, improving livelihood. We believe that legislative activities that sustainably improve on these three key indicators will improve the economy and ultimately guarantee a better life for our people.

7. The collapse in oil price has without doubt brought huge shock to our economy on a scale that perhaps, has never been experienced before. This requires us to develop creative strategies that would stimulate business and investments into other sectors. For decades, we have talked about the need to diversify our economy. But we have failed to take the

necessary steps in policy and legislations that would set us on the path to developing the kind of economy that we desire. The Ease of Doing Business Report that ranks our country 167 out of 189 countries is not likely to attract business into our economy. This Senate understands this. With the support from our international development partners, the organised private sector, we commissioned an expert report which identified 54 extant laws that must be reviewed and brought in line with international best practices in order to open up our economy up for private investments and business.

8. This legislative intervention yielded about 15 major economic reform bills and 7 business environment bills. Some of these bills have since entered the dockets of the Senate and are at various stages of consideration as some also have been passed by the Senate. Chief among those passed include, the Electronic Transaction bill 2015; Debt Recovery and Insolvency bill 2015 and; the Railway Bill which is being considered through the final lap. All these bills represent a watershed in economic and business legislations in our country.

9. The Electronic Transaction Bill 2015 for example, will be the first legal framework ever in our country that provides the legal foundation for electronic signatures and guarantees predictability in contracts made electronically. Once signed into law, this bill will offer full protections to contracts entered into via emails, and transactions conducted with online shops, electronic commerce and services platforms, which are currently not provided for in our laws. Another obvious benefit of this bill is will reduce the cost of doing business by eliminating

transportation and other logistics cost. By passing this bill, the Senate has given legitimacy and local application to the United Nations Convention on the Use of Electronic Communications in International Contracts, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 23rd November 2005 (the UN Convention).

This new legal framework when signed into law will embolden our innovative creativity and open up new areas of investment opportunity for our youths and startups who have hitherto suffered lack of support from creditors and investors due to the absence of this law. This implication is that we now have opportunity to see the emergence of new generation online, electronic application giants in the mold of Chinedu Echeruo.

10. Another important bill that has emerged from our Ease of Doing Business intervention is the Bankruptcy & Insolvency Repeal and Amendment Bill 2015. These are the super structure on which a 21st century Nigerian economy must be built on. Nigeria has been ranked very low in dealing with corporate insolvency due to the multiple, costly and unwieldy resolution framework under the old 1979 Act. Aside from removing the clogs in the process of transiting insolvency to administration, this new bill guarantees that the process becomes even more efficient, less exhausting and result oriented. The primary objective of this bill is to shift the paradigm of business administration from focusing on penalizing failures to encouraging credit and entrepreneurship. This is one bill that has the potential to transform the Nigerian financial landscape by enabling consistent supply of credit;

attracting new capital and expertise into business revival; improving creditor recoveries and lowering the cost of credit.

11. There is no gainsaying that an efficient transportation system is a critical component of economic development anywhere. For the first time since 1924, the Railway bill will open up the subsector and attract the required private capital into this segment of our transport system that has appeared stuck in the past. The influx of private sector players, states and local government will not only stimulate rapid rural development, it will also create economic values by making transportation of goods more efficient, safer, and cheaper. The direct and indirect implication this will have for our economy, especially in the agricultural subsector cannot be overemphasized. I am confident that this very important bill will also be passed soon.

12. Review of the Public Procurement Act is another major intervention by the Senate. This review is inspired by the need to guarantee government patronage for local manufacturers. Our desire is to ensure that a substantial percentage of the N6 trillion in the national budget is retained in the local economy and put in the pockets of our people. We believe that if government is obligated to patronize local businesses, wealth would be created, local industries would grow, productivity would increase and we would begin to see real reduction in mass unemployment. In adopting this approach, we have drawn inspiration from other developed economies that had done the same thing at a crucial stage in their development. The United States did the same thing around 1922 with the Buy America policy that was promoted by the

Herbert Hoover administration. China, South Africa and other countries have similar laws that creatively promotes local businesses.

The agriculture credit scheme bill and the Chartered Institute for Soil Science bill we have just passed into law are part of a critical segment of legislative interventions we have designed to boost the current policy on agriculture as a major plank of the diversification policy of government. In the coming months we are determined to continue to focus our legislative energy at high impact legislation across the critical sectors of our economy.

13. Distinguished colleagues, I have gone to fairly great lengths to articulate some of the work we have done in the last one year. I have done this to underline the fact that it is only through these functions that our performance would be measured by Nigerians and our presence here would be justified. By outlining these interventions, we are also able to appreciate the great work that still lies ahead of us. Like I have said earlier, the big challenge for our generation is that of creating a modern economy that is capable of delivering prosperity to all our citizens. We in the Senate will continue to find creative solutions to the old problems that have kept our country from realizing its full potentials. This is the work we have been elected to do.

14. Distinguished colleagues, for too long Nigerians have challenged us to justify our presence in this chamber. Many have wondered what exactly we do here or why we should be entitled to certain privileges. I believe that the best answer we can provide to all these is to continue to seek ways that would enable the ordinary citizen feel the impact of the

Senate in their lives. I dream of a day when the poor woman sitting in her house in rural Awka would be able to see the benefit of our work on her life. I dream of a day when a child going to school in Gusau would feel the benefit of the laws that we make. I dream of a day when a young lady in Oshogbo would be able to say how the Senate has helped her small business. I dream of a day when a farmer in Ogoja would see how those of us gathered in this chamber has helped to improve his life. I am confident that if we continue of the path that we have walked in the past year, that day will come soon.

15. We have continued to lay emphasis and focus our attention on matters that directly touch our people. For us it is our first priority, to use lawmaking as a tool to play our part in the struggle to ensure that the welfare and security of our people remains paramount in the discharge of governance in this country. You would recall that that we had within the first month of assumption of office visited the IDP camp where some of our brothers and sisters displaced by the insurgency are staying. We went there to feel their plight and to assure them that they are not forgotten. We pledge that as lawmakers we will do whatever is necessary to support government to alleviate their sufferings. Today, we are on the verge of passing the North East Development Commission Bill which we see as a critical instrument to bringing succor to the displaced restoring and rebuilding the north east from the devastation that it has experienced in recent times. We have continued to approach our work within this policy direction in mind. This is why we have sought and engaged with labour and the ministry of power on the

electricity tariff, and continued to address issues of injustices wherever we are called upon to intervene.

16. We are determined to continue to pursue engagement and consultation as a major legislative policy where our people take ownership and our legislative authority is further enhanced by the enriching through the knowledge and participation of our people in the entire process. Just as we did with the organised private sector, we are looking forward to engaging the Nigerian health sector, education and security in organised sections to seek their input to our legislative proposals. In the spirit of this initiative let me use this opportunity to send out an open invitation to all Nigerians, this Senate and by extension, the 8th National Assembly is ready to engage with you, we urge you to bring forward your ideas lets engage to make Nigeria better.

17. Since our inauguration, we have been inundated with complains from our people on the rising levels of violence against women and sexual harassment and rape. the 8th Senate is coming up with proposals that will not only help to eliminate these depravities but also ensure that perpetrators will no longer have any where to hide. We are determined to ensure that our women, our children and the vulnerable in our society irrespective of their age, status and ethnic background live in a safe and fulfilling environment where their rights are respected and their security is assured.

18. Distinguished Senators, permit me to seize this opportunity to formally congratulate President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR on the one-year anniversary of his government and to also commend him for the

great achievements he has recorded on several fronts. We are all grateful to Mr. President that Boko Haram, a mindless terrorist group that once threatened our corporate existence as a country has been severely degraded. I also commend the president for his bold and courageous fight against corruption, which has manifested in improved probity and accountability in operations of government business.

19. On our part and in keeping with our pledge to support the anticorruption crusade, this Senate has within this period carried out oversight investigations into the noticed abuse in the implementation of the Treasury Single Account saving government over N20bn and the implementation of the Rice Importation Waivers and Duties policy of government and the latest NEITI Report detailing humongous levels of corruption totaling over 3trillion naira. All these and many more system leakages we must do all in our power to expose. Our anticorruption agencies must double their effort at ensuring that these kind of wholesale abuses are no longer part of our governance history. This is what the anti corruption war must be about.

20. However, it is important that as we move forward in this fight, considerable attention is paid to strengthening the anti-corruption agencies to enable them discharge their functions with greater efficiency and fairness. We want to assure Mr. President that the Senate will continue to play its part in the fight against corruption, which we believe is cardinal in our desire to improve governance in our country. We will also continue to broaden the scope for increased openness and accountability that we have promised at the legislative level.

21. While the government has made progress in the fight against Boko Haram and in the fight against corruption, the fight against mass poverty remains a daunting challenge. Rising cost of living, increased cases of retrenchment and corresponding rise in unemployment, inability of state governors to pay salaries, upsurge in ethnic-based agitation, potentially denies government the full credit of the great strides it has made in other areas. The same energy that has been invested in fighting corruption and Boko Haram must be invested in taking care of the people, in making life easier and better for them. We need to begin to assure Nigerians that the sacrifice that they make today will not be in vain. We need to begin to show them that there would be light at the end of the dark tunnel. So we must not relent in our efforts in this area over the next years ahead.

22. These are serious challenges that require all hands to be on deck. There is no other time in our history than now when the business of government needs to be conducted with great inclusiveness. We must find a way to bring the best brains in our country on board wherever they may be found. Even those who did not vote for us but believe in the change that we all believe is necessary to move our country forward should be given a seat at the table. If we are able to mobilise the best human resources that God has bountifully blessed our country with, I have no doubt that with God on our side, we shall overcome.

23. I cannot end this address without a note on the on going security challenges we are beginning to witness in the Niger Delta area of our country. We urge the warring militants to embrace our democratic institutions and channel their grievances through appropriate quarters as

we can ill afford further damage to the ecosystem of this all important region and any more disruptions in the system. In the same vein, we also encourage government to adopt dialogue and engagement as a more lasting option towards resolving this challenge. We also call on the leaders in the area to play their part and ensure through mediation that this menace is comprehensively quelled.

24. We note the Federal Government's plan to invest 500 billion in social protection programs in the current budget. We want to urge the government to ensure that appropriate mechanism is devised which would ensure that the benefits of these programs get to those who are genuinely in need. We are confident that one year after, the President must by now have better clarity on the capacity of his appointees. The Senate would not hesitate to hold any appointee accountable for the work he has accepted to do. We would like to seek Mr. President's support and co-operation to enable us discharge this oversight task.

25. Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, over the last one year we have charted a new course and a new direction for lawmaking. One which has placed emphasis on leading by example. We have adopted the open-nass initiative which is aimed at deepening our people's confidence in our activities by reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks and opening the National Assembly to greater public engagement and scrutiny. In this instance, we have expanded opportunity for greater interaction with the public beyond snippets of reporting to full and real-time plenary activity broadcast on broadband, the first of its kind in West Africa. For the first time we have broadened

budget consideration engagement incorporating the Civil Society and the Non governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the country. We are not resting on this laurels but will continue to press ahead towards a total openness.

26. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, let me assure you once again that as representatives of the people, the Senate will not relent in our efforts to continue to give voice and vent to those issues that mostly concern the people of this country. The people of Nigeria must see this Senate as the place to run to when they feel treated unjustly. This Senate has the capacity to bring to end the culture of impunity in this country and we must. We must let everyone realize that the time when anyone can deliberately violate the right of any Nigerian citizen, any Nigerian woman, any Nigerian child and nothing would happen is gone. There must be consequences for child abuse just as there must be consequences for sexual harassment, unjust dismissal and consumer rights violation. These are the standards that the rest of the world would use in judging us as a society of civilized people and of law.

27. Dear colleagues, even as we continue to focus on those big things that we have not achieved, we must also have the courage to celebrate the things that we have achieved. One year ago, this Senate appeared irreparably divided against itself. Today, we have overcome that division and we are able to work with greater unity and fraternity. I want to commend everyone of us for this. On our side in the leadership, we would like to assure you that we would continue to ensure fairness and justice for every Senator and will continue to work to protect and

preserve the dignity of the red chamber.

28. Distinguished Senators, ladies and gentlemen, permit me to once again thank you for the unalloyed support I have and continue to receive from you in the last one year. This has been unprecedented and I don't take it lightly. This unique support has been steady, bipartisan, and unconditional. Your support has been the bulwark bone on which my belief in the emergence of a greater Nigeria rest. Your support has meant everything to me and I am more than ever determined to play my role as a leader to see to the emergence of a more virile National Assembly playing its constitutional role without fear or favour. I congratulate all of you once again for all that we have achieved in the last one year. I am confident that when the history of this era is written, all of us would be amply remembered as the generation that played its part and did its best to make Nigeria a better place.

29. Thank you and God bless.

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE