

SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE OF THE
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA, HIS EXCELLENCY (DR.) ABUBAKAR
BUKOLA SARAOKI AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OPEN WEEK ON
TUESDAY JULY 16, 2018.

PROTOCOLS.

1. Your Excellences, Distinguished colleagues and invited guests, it is my singular honour to welcome you all to the first ever National Assembly Open Week (NASSOW). Parliaments all over the world act as unifying forces in a democratic society, because the manner of their composition makes them the true representatives of the people. It follows, therefore, that the National Assembly is the closest arm of government to the Nigerian people, with every single member having been elected by those whom we serve.

2. The wide-ranging activities that we have planned for this week will ensure that we will remain the closest to the people, and that our doors will remain open. The accessibility of the National Assembly Complex is deliberate and intended to afford citizens unfettered access to their elected representatives. While we are finding the balance between ensuring the safety of members, staff and visitors in line with the security imperatives, we shall continue to keep the National Assembly open to the public, as the legislature remains the most critical aspect of any democracy.

3. As a legislature, we are very much aware that modern democratic lawmaking requires the deliberate engagement of the people; and issues that matter to the people should form the core objective of parliament. It is hugely satisfying, therefore, to observe that, for the first time, the National Assembly is becoming the People's Parliament. A place where all shades of opinion are aired, and experts are able to contribute their quota to the task of nation-building by helping to find solutions that will bring about societal transformation. This is what an open, transparent, accountable and inclusive legislature is about. I have no doubt that this National Assembly Open Week will make for a broadening of the relationship between lawmakers and those we serve up and down this country.

4. An Open Week also assures us that the National Assembly is in tune with the mood of the nation. Findings show that some 80 per cent of Nigerians actively support open government policies. We in the 8th National Assembly are directed by the voice of the people, in the full knowledge that governance is the collective responsibility of all arms of Government. The onus is on those who have been elected to be accountable, while the governed should also play their part by continuously engaging representatives, in order to put across their desires and get clarity on how legislators are working to help actualise these yearnings.

5. However, it remains a concern that, because the legislature is the youngest arm of government in Nigeria, it is the most misunderstood. This is largely due to an abiding misconception as to the role of the legislature and the work we are doing to stabilise democracy and ensure accountability in governance. It is my expectation that this programme will go a long way towards helping to deepen the public understanding of the very real, indispensable work done by lawmakers, in line with our constitutional mandate.

6. One evidence of the negative perception is the lack of understanding of the budget process and the role of the National Assembly, which is seen, unfairly, as holding up the passing of the budget. Nothing could be further from the truth. We promised, and were the first Nigerian legislature to make the civil society part of the budget process through the institutionalisation of the Public Hearing process as part of the Budget process. For the first time, civil society has a voice at the table, with regard to the Budget. Public Hearing on the Budget as part of the enactment process, has come to stay.

7. Our Legislative Agenda includes core points including: extensive oversight, core fiscal policy, budget scrutiny and passage - as well as transparency in the Budget of the National Assembly itself. I am happy to note that we have recorded many achievements in our oversight role; and in terms of budget transparency, we led by example; in a historic first, we opened up the National Assembly Budget for public inspection.

8. In addition, electronic voting commenced in 2006 in this 8th National Assembly. We have a fully functional website where citizens can find information on their representatives in the Senate and the House. We also instituted livestreams of plenary online, to enable citizens follow proceedings in order to engage with and participate in the law-making process. The 8th Senate has passed more bills than any before it, and has resolved disputes in 138 petitions – this performance is unprecedented. We are working for Nigerians and by this Open Week, we are opening up even wider avenues for the people to get a better understanding of what we do, and to engage with us and make their views known, so we can serve them better.

9. It is popularly said about democracy that it is of the people, by the people and for the people. This can only be so if the people are provided with the information they need to more actively participate in governance. We recognise that it is our job as lawmakers to ensure that Nigerians are carried along in the law-making process. It is our mandate to drive public policy that will improve the well-being of Nigerians. Staying in touch with our constituents will allow us to track the performance of these policies, and this feedback can be used to fine-tune or amend these policies.

10. Your Excellences, distinguished colleagues and invited guests, for collaboration to be effective between the three arms of government, we must strive to adhere to certain fundamental principles. These include accountability which implies adhering to our constitutionally defined powers and responsibilities. Secondly, it is important that we conduct the affairs of government in a transparent manner and ensure that all political representatives are truly accountable to the electorate at all times. Finally, we must recognise the complementarity nature of our responsibilities and thus act cooperatively towards each other and render mutual support.

11. No doubt, with all of us working together in these and many other constructive ways, we would be seeing to the deepening of the Open NASS ideal, while at the same time contributing to the continued effective working together of the legislature and the executive arms of government, for the benefit of Nigerians. I wish you all a wonderful and insightful time at National Assembly Open Week.

12. Long live the National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE