



PRESS STATEMENT

October 2, 2017

Speaker Yakubu Dogara's Comments On NGO Regulation Bill: A Call for Civil Disobedience

The Resource Centre for Human Rights & Civic Education (CHRICED), alongside other credible actors in the Nigerian civic space, remains resolute in resisting the oppressive and obnoxious NGO Regulation Bill currently being considered by the National Assembly. In fact, the recent comments credited to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara to the effect that the legislature cannot be intimidated by the CSOs reaction to abandon the Bill, shows clearly that the lawmakers have already concluded their ill-conceived agenda to trample on the civil liberties of citizens, by silencing critics and voices of dissent. To say the least, the careless statement is an invitation to civil disobedience.

Speaker Dogara has unwittingly let the cat out of the bag by revealing the real sponsors of this discredited piece of legislation. It is a situation which is akin to the Biblical "hand of Esau and the voice of Jacob," especially as the Speaker's comments show clearly that the topmost echelon of the National Assembly, is uncomfortable with the work of credible and critical CSOs/NGOs, which have been relentless in exposing and criticizing the gluttonous consumption of scarce national resources by a few political elites in the National Assembly through budget paddings, over pricing/invoicing, etc, to the detriment of majority of citizens. The anger of the leadership of the National Assembly comes from the fact that CSOs/NGOs have continued to underscore the nexus between NASS's opaque and bloated allowances and the sordid realities of pervasive mass unemployment, poor education, and health infrastructure, bad roads, violent crimes, and other manifestations of failed governance, which Nigerians have been subjected to.

It is clear to us that the legislators, who have been under intense scrutiny by citizen groups over realities like bloated allowances and damaging budget padding controversies, are keen to shift the spotlight away from themselves, and focus it elsewhere. Their clever-by-half stratagem is to put the focus on active citizens who have been organizing, with no support from the state, and have been at the forefront of demanding accountability and transparent governance from Dogara and his colleagues at the National Assembly.

CHRICED takes exception to the impression being created by the lawmakers to the effect that NGOs/CSOs criticizing the ill-conceived Bill are trying to avoid accountability. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Unlike the arrogant lawmakers who feel they are masters, not servants of the Nigerian people, NGOs are currently accountable to a chain of institutions, including the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), the Financial Reporting Council and relevant departments of the anti-graft agencies, should they be involved in any financial wrong doing. NGO/CSOs, which get funding from local and international funding partners, must as a matter of procedure be subjected to periodic external audits. It is also critical to educate the Speaker that credibility checks are the first set of tests done by international partners before engaging any serious NGO for project implementation. Regular narrative and financial reports alongside the periodic audits ensure proper financial governance of projects. This is not the case with the National Assembly, which has become law unto itself, and gets irritated whenever citizens raise questions about how public funds are spent.

Consequently, if it is the case that the Speaker or the National Assembly has had some sordid experience with some nameless NGOs who according to him, disappeared with funds for rehabilitation of the North East, what that clearly shows is that proper background or credibility checks and due diligence were not conducted by those who handed over the funds. From the way the Speaker sounds, the National Assembly may have been the direct victim of the scam in question, as the so-called NGO

may have been fronting for them. That would not be surprising, considering the fact that the current National Assembly has an ingrained culture of corruption, while being spiteful of any form of public scrutiny. That some scam artists masquerading as NGOs succeeded in duping whoever they duped, cannot possibly mean that majority of NGOs/CSOs should be branded as rogue organizations. Speaker Dogara should know better than branding an entire community of active citizens in a negative light just to achieve the preconceived agenda of silencing dissent. It is on record that over 50% of National Assembly members, particularly the principal officers, are currently under investigation by various anti-graft agencies. It may well be nice to call for scrapping of the NASS, aptly described by the former President Olusegun Obsanjo as “Assembly of corruption”.

Instead of propping up this discredited bill to undermine credible NGOs/CSOs, Speaker Dogara should rather name and shame those involved in the scam he talks about, while extant laws should be used to mete sanctions to such errant groups. That would be a better approach than using the infraction of some nameless groups, as the basis to disparage a whole community of organizations. As frontline activist, Ms. Ayo Obe puts it, the NGOs/CSOs, which tend to be involved in sharp practices and other shades of impunity, are those with close affiliation to the politicians. We endorse Ms. Obe apt categorization of such errant NGOs/CSOs as Politicians NGOs (PONGOs), Government NGOs (GONGOs) and Wives of Politicians NGOs (WINGOs). These are the kind of NGOs/CSOs that the Bill seeks to empower to take over the civic space. More importantly, we do not see anything new the NGO Regulation Bill intends to add to the existing layers of accountability that credible NGOs/CSOs face.

The National Assembly in its rabid moves to tie credible and critical NGOs/CSOs to the apron string of politicians because of the criticism of its anti-people position has suddenly forgotten history. It is these same voices that successfully waged the struggle against military dictatorship; these same voices, which the National Assembly is attempting to silence with its poisonous Bill withstood the jackboots, and the barrels of the guns of military goons. At that historic juncture, many of those who are arrogantly trying to silence the civic will were nowhere to be found. Most of them sitting as law makers only emerged from nowhere to occupy the space after grassroots organizations fought to chase away the military from the political space. These legislators must therefore understand that the civic will, which took the military out of the political space is still very much available to put meddlesome interlopers where they rightfully belong. The capacity to organize popular mass movements, and effective civil disobedience campaigns against oppressive legislations like the NGO Regulation Bill, is still very much available.

Finally, Speaker Dogara’s ploy to use divide and rule tactics to promote this rejected Bill is clear for all to see. The statement that churches and mosques would be exempted from the Bill is yet another falsehood aimed at distracting attention from the real motive of the Bill. All groups which organize citizens behind one cause or the other fall within the categorization of NGOs/CSOs and they are all registered under the same law. Instead of the double speak and the attempt to impose a discredited legislation on the people, the National Assembly should rather justify its bloated (legal and illegal allowances) by legislating to address the fundamental challenges facing Nigerians; this will include the problem of massive youth unemployment, poor healthcare, and education, high rate of maternal mortality, corruption, poverty and the mass misery in the land.

Signed:

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