

10th Reps' Public Accounts Committee: The promised paradigm shift

Accountability and transparency issues have remained big challenges facing public expenditure by over 900 Ministries, Departments and Agencies of the Federal Government (MDAs) over the years, leaving the Public Accounts Committees (PACs) of both chambers of the National Assembly with the responsibilities of looking through their books to ascertain what were rightly or wrongly done. **JOSHUA EGBODO** writes on the expectations as the 10th House of Representatives' PAC unveils agenda

PAC in eyes of the law

The Public Accounts Committee, simply abbreviated as PAC in both the Senate and the House of Representatives is the only standing, and, or special committee in the National Assembly which has a constitutional mention, and must therefore be in existence in each parliamentary assembly, irrespective of any choice of the players.

Outside the leeway granted the parliament to set rules as well as regulate its activities, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as amended, specifically provided in Section 85 (5) that “the Public Accounts Committees of the National Assembly shall examine the audited accounts of government showing the appropriation of the sums granted by the National Assembly to meet the public expenditure, and any report made by the Auditor-General of the Federation concerning such accounts”.

But the challenges

Experience over the years have shown that much in the mandate of the committee have not been achieved, with audit reports always lagging behind in years, and where they come in, the PAC constrained by time to meet the expected results. With about the 900 MDAs' books expected to be scrutinised by Office of the Auditor General of the Federation on an annual basis, and the limited capacity in financial and manpower resources, the story had remained of lamentation year in, year out.

This is usually compounded by the unyielding and uncooperative attitude of the MDAs, which is believably fuelled by the lack of powers to sanction, or prosecute erring agencies by the Auditor General of the Federation.

A worrisome case in question as examined by analysts, is the current development in which the Office of the Auditor General of the Federation had been under the leadership of a Supervising Director for a time longer than needful.

A paradigm shift?

With the successful composition, and unveiling of the PAC of the 10th House of Representatives in Abuja on Monday at a programme that saw the training of members on leadership, experts have opined that new approaches to the business may be in the offing.

Chairman of the committee, Hon. Bamidele Salam gave insight into what the panel would be bringing on board as the current assembly last for about the next four years.

“Government has been fully formed with the inauguration of Ministers by Mr. President while Committees have been constituted in the two chambers of the National Assembly. We have no time to spare in delivering results to our people. Committees must actively engage MDAs to ensure optimum service delivery in accordance with legislations passed by the National Assembly.

“In the discharge of your committee assignment and oversight, you must be guided by established legislative ethics and standing orders of the House”, Salam in his remarks quoted Speaker of the House, Hon. Tajudeen Abass from a welcome-back speech when the House was back in session from its annual recess as a motivation.

On the vision and mission of the brand pane, Salam said it is “To significantly improve on the delivery of the mandates of the Public Accounts Committee as enshrined in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended), Standing Orders of the House of Representatives and Legislative Practices/Conventions”, and “To ensure that Ministries, Departments and Agencies of the Federal Government utilize public funds in a lawful,

prudent, transparent and accountable manner for the good of the Nigerian people”.

The fresh agenda

Rolling out the fresh agenda and focus of the new committee to include digitalisation of PAC meetings, oversights, documentation and reporting systems using relevant media and technology tools to reduce paper work and ensure greater efficiency, Liaising with the Executive to facilitate immediate appointment of a substantive Auditor-General of the Federation.

Also on the list were the Passage of the Audit Bill into law, Passage of the Public Accounts Implementation Tribunal Bill into law, Proper Follow-up on House Resolutions that arise from PAC Reports, and Ensuring value for money (performance audit) on all federal government expenditures through regular oversight functions and project audit visitations

Beyond the Nigerian shores, the committee said it will Activate partnership/membership in the following bodies:

- National Association of Public Accounts in Nigeria
- West African Public Accounts Committees
- Southern Africa Development Community Organisation of Public Accounts Committees
- African Organisation of Public Accounts Committees (AFROPAC)
- Commonwealth Public Accounts Committees

Leadership admonition

On ground to unveil the committee on Monday, was Speaker Abass, represented by his deputy, Benjamin Kalu. In his message, he said the PAC is one of the most important committees of the House and its importance is underscored by its express creation by

Section 85 (5) of the 1999 Constitution as Amended.

His words; In the 10th Assembly, the PAC is committed to deepening its engagement with the Executive Arm of Government to ensure that Ministries, Departments, and Agencies of government uphold the principles of accountability, transparency, and prudence in the management of public finance. The PAC is also committed to strengthening the office of the Auditor General of the Federation in line with best global practices.

“The recent passage of the Federal Audit Bill to repeal the 1956 Audit Ordinance is in line with this commitment. The PAC’s mandate is very broad and expansive. It covers all aspects of government finance, including the collection, expenditure, and accounting of public funds. The PAC also has the power to investigate any financial irregularities, regardless of where they occur in the government. To understand this vital role, it is quite auspicious that PAC members are trained to exercise their functions diligently, without any let or hindrance. It is my hope that this unveiling would retool you to this call to duty for the tax payer. You cannot afford to fail.

“The work of the PAC is complemented by the Office of the Auditor General of the Federation. It is in this light that the Auditor General’s Office needs to be occupied. The appointment should be in

place because it is a requirement of the Constitution.

“I am confident that the PAC will be vital in helping the 10th Assembly achieve its goals of ensuring transparency, accountability, and good governance in Nigeria.

“The National Assembly is interested and committed to the office of the Auditor general. What’s adequate for that job to be done, fully well, is at least, one percent of the total budget of the federal republic of Nigeria. That’s what that office needs if they must do the job and do it very well. We are committed as people with the power of the purse to review the budget of the Auditor general office, unless we don’t want about the 900 MDAs to be well over-sighted”.

In reference to a report of poor and ineffective audit of MDAs as earlier presented by a coalition civil society organisations, the Speaker said “as the civil society mentioned, most of these MDAs were not touched, and the issue is due to lack of adequate resources for the auditor general’s office to get the it done. We should not make them magicians, we should equip them to sufficiently to pursue the money of Nigeria so that the work of the National Assembly will be easier.

“The introduction of technology will help us become more transparent to document better and make the results coming out from our exercise more credible. The oversight function is going to make use of technology. So in no distant time, expect the launching and unveiling of what we call NASS Eyes. To do this also, the collaboration of the executive cannot be overstated, though we are three arms of government, we are one government pursuing one national objective. Objective of the renewed hope where revenues will be increased and leakages blocked.

“I’m joining my voice to that of my brother, the chairman of PAC committee, we cannot afford to have an acting director or whatever nomenclature occupying that important position of auditor general. We urge Mr President to look into confirming the person who’s there or anybody of his choice to take up the role of Auditor General of this country, it will send the right signal that this government is ready to pursue taxes.

High expectations

With assurances from the committee, that members are ready “to hit the ground running, and the leadership’s pledge of unwavering support, analysts have infected that Nigerians can only expect the best outcomes.