

EDITORIAL: Freedom of Information Bill

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Ordinarily, the news should elicit jubilation among those who want a regime of transparency and accountability in governance. According to Senator Victor Ndoma-Egba, chairman of the senate committee on the media, the Access to Information Bill will soon be passed by the National Assembly. His words: "In a few weeks time, we shall be returning to the senate chamber for final approval. So, we are going to start reaping its benefits in the life time of this present administration."

The problem is that Nigerians have had similar assurances in the past. As a matter of fact, the lower chamber, the House of Representatives, passed the bill as far back as 2004. In those two years, the senate has been to-ing and fro-ing, without apparently coming up with anything, other than assurances that the bill will soon be passed. It was the same game the first legislature played with the bill from 1999 to 2003 when its tenure expired. There is nothing concrete to indicate that anything would change in the life of the second legislature.

The irony is that for a nation haemorrhaging from corruption as a result of opaque governance, one would have thought that any effort aimed at making the conduct of public affairs more open would be enthusiastically embraced by lawmakers. The reverse seems to be the case. We are hard put to understand the complications in the proposed legislation that makes it so difficult for the senate to pass it two clear years after the lower chamber did so. Though there may be no hard evidence for it, the suspicion cannot be helped that certain vested interests are bent on killing the bill because of its capacity to expose graft and other wrong-doings in government.

For sure, much of the public corruption that goes on is able to be perpetrated only because of the official secrets act (OSA) which screens offenders from the prying eyes of the public. If, for example, members of the public were given access to filings of public office holders before the Code of Code Bureau, a lot of corrupt persons would be exposed. But because the declarations of their assets before entering and leaving office are a closely-guarded secret, a lot of them engage in wanton looting of the public treasury in the knowledge that their atrocities would never come to public light. In the matter of corruption, the National Assembly has had its fair share of salacious scandals.

In fact, on a couple of occasions, the integrity of the National assembly has been impugned by allegations of corruption against the leadership which has had to be changed at one time or the other as a result of those charges. Apart from their own case, the federal legislators are aware that the main reason why Nigeria is a hobbled country is due to unmitigated corruption. If, as custodians of the people's weal, they cannot pass a simple bill in so many years to make governance more open and transparent, then the senators leave no room for any other interpretation of their failure other than vested interest. After all, if they were really eager to pass the bill, they have excellent examples from Britain and Australia to make their job easy.

Aside the legislature, we are also disappointed at the tepid manner with which the Obasanjo administration has handled the bill. Whether an executive bill or not, one would have thought that a government that has proclaimed anti-corruption as a key plank in its policy platform would provide effective executive lobby to drive the bill because of its potentials to bring about a regime of clean government. On the contrary, what we have seen is an

administration that doesn't appear to care whether the bill sees the light of day or not. And time is again running out.

Given the history of the bill, it is doubtful whether between now and when the legislators would have to go on the political hustings a few months away, the senate could conclude work on the bill, harmonise its position with that of the lower chamber, and jointly pass it in time for the president to provide its assent. If that doesn't happen before the second legislature expires in 2007, then this piece of important legislation, otherwise known as freedom of information bill, will have to go back to the drawing board. Who knows, that may be what the senators actually want.