Senate shoots down Akpoti-Uduaghan’s sexual harassment allegations against Akpabio

Date: 2025-03-06

Source: https://thenationonlineng.net/senate-shoots-down-akpoti-uduaghans-sexual-harassment-allegations-against-akpabio/

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• Senate President denies senator’s claim  
  
• Abuja court stops Ethic’s panel from probing senator  
  
• Pro-Natasha protests rock National Assembly  
  
After a flurry of debates, the Senate yesterday shot down the allegations of sexual harassment by Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan against its President, Godswill Akpabio.  
  
Her petition on the alleged sexual assault was rejected by the Senate Committee on Ethics, Code of Conduct and Public Petitions, after it was laid before the panel in the Red Chamber.  
  
According to the committee, the petition was “dead on arrival,’ adding that it breached the relevant rules of the Senate.  
  
Trouble started between Akpabio and Akpoti-Uduaghan during plenary last week over the reallocation of seats.  
  
While Akpoti-Uduaghan was informed about the new sitting arrangement, she kicked.  
  
The senator later raised allegation of sexual harassment against the Senate President.  
  
During the plenary yesterday, Akpabio denied the allegation of sexual harassment, emphasising that he had never at any point sexually harassed the Kogi Central senator or any other woman.  
  
He said: “I did not harass Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan sexually and I have never harassed any woman sexually.”  
  
There was also a dramatic twist to the controversy as a Federal High Court in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), restrained the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions from conducting a disciplinary proceeding against the Kogi senator.  
  
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The presiding judge, Obiora Egwuatu, gave the order on Tuesday, following an ex parte application filed by Akpoti-Uduaghan’s counsel, who complained about plans by the Senate to suspend her.  
  
However, pro-Akpoti-Uduaghan protesters, made up of people from Kogi Central, besieged the gate of the National Assembly over the allegations.  
  
Led by the senator’s lawyer, Victor Giwa, the placard-carrying protesters, who complained about victimisation of Akpoti-Uduaghan, called for an unbiased investigation.  
  
Akpabio: I never harassed anyone  
  
Akpabio dismissed the sexual allegation as a ruse, saying that he never assaulted anyone.  
  
In his speech to the Senate, he said: “I and my siblings were raised very well by my late single mother who died in 2000 through very difficult times and I therefore, have the highest regards for women. Even after her demise, I still cry when I remember her.  
  
“I also wish to state that I also have four beautiful daughters. So, at no time will I ever harass any woman and I have never done so.  
  
“In addition, even as a state governor, I was awarded various awards. One of them was the most gender-friendly governor in Nigeria. I served between 2007 and 2015, to God be the glory.  
  
“In conclusion, I urge all Nigerians, particularly the media and then of course the members of the social media to await the court’s decision and please do not jump to conclusions on matters of mere allegations.  
  
“I want to thank you for listening to me. I thank my colleagues because some of your phone calls were calls of support, solidarity and prayer that the Almighty God will step in to vindicate the just.”  
  
Drama in Senate  
  
Akpoti-Uduaghan entered the Senate wing of the National Assembly, accompanied by her husband, who gave her a kiss, before they parted for the senator to go into plenary while he went to observe proceedings from the gallery.  
  
Raising a point of order, Akpoti-Uduaghan had at the beginning of plenary said she had a petition to submit before the Senate.  
  
She was granted leave to lay it by Akpabio.  
  
After laying the petition on the table, Akpabio duly referred it to the Senate Committee on Ethics, Code of Conduct and Public Petitions, directing the panel to report back to plenary.  
  
Although Akpabio had referred the petition to the committee for consideration, senators kicked against it, saying that it was not only subjudice, but a direct breach of the Standing Rules.  
  
The Chief Whip, Mohammed Tahir Monguno, citing Order 40(4), insisting that the rules should be strictly adhered to.  
  
Order 40(4) reads: “No Senator may present to the Senate a petition signed by himself,’ argued that Senate rules must be strictly adhered to.  
  
Monguno, who warned that breaches could lead to “chaos and anarchy,” said no matter pending before a court of law should be deliberated upon by the Senate, as it would be deemed subjudice.  
  
He also pointed out that the Senate rules prohibit any senator from presenting a petition personally signed by him or her.  
  
Monguno said: “Senator Natasha has signed her own petition, rendering it procedurally invalid.”  
  
But Akpoti-Uduaghan, who cited Order 10 on matters of privilege, explained that her case before the court was not related to sexual harassment.  
  
She pointed out that the matter in court was about the malicious comment about her dressing by Akpabio’s aide.  
  
There was commotion as Akpoti-Uduaghan, who was not permitted to speak further, insisted that her petition was proper and therefore, should be accepted by the committee.  
  
To restore order, former Senate Leader Senator Yahaya Abdullahi argued that since Akpabio had already ruled on the matter, the petition should proceed to the Ethics Committee for further legislative action.  
  
Abdullahi said: “When the issue gets to the committee, the chairman will uphold all the rules.”  
  
At this point there was uproar and mixed reactions among senators, with most of them wanting to speak on the issue through point of order.  
  
Senator Cyril Fasuyi, after he was recognized to speak, quoted from Psalm 34:19, saying: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth them from them all.”  
  
He alleged that Akpoti-Uduaghan had once accused former Ekiti State Governor Kayode Fayemi of allegedly selling off the Ajaokuta Steel Company Limited when he was the Minister of Mines and Steel during President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration.  
  
Noting that Ajaokuta Steel Company Limited belongs to the Federal Government till date, Fasuyi, who represents Ekiti Central District, said that Fayemi would bring a petition on the wrong accusation to the Senate to seek redress.  
  
At this point, the Senate Leader, Opeyemi Bamidele said no senator can author or sign his or her own petition, urging the Senate to uphold its rules to prevent a dangerous precedent.  
  
He said: “The Senate President’s wife had already taken legal action on the matter, reinforcing the argument that the issue was already before the courts and therefore, could not be entertained by the Senate Committee on Ethics, Code of Conduct and Public Petitions.”  
  
Bamidele added: “Mr. President, I sympathize with you as a man being accused of sexual harassment.  
  
We are guided by three things: The Constitution, the Rule Book, and Mr. President, we are not guided by emotions. You were being emotional, that was why you referred that petition to the Committee on Ethics. We must be guided by our Rule Book.”  
  
Reacting to Bamidele’s comment, Akpabio explained that he had allowed the petition because he did not want the public who may not understand the Senate procedures to believe that he was victimising Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
He said: I took that petition because I didn’t want the people who do not understand our rules in the Senate to think that I am deliberately silencing her because I am involved.”  
  
As the tension persisted in the chambers, the Senate Leader called for a closed-door session.  
  
But the Senate President ruled that plenary should continue to prevent giving room for insinuations.  
  
The Chairman of the Committee on Ethics, Code of Conduct and Public Petitions, Senator Nelda Imasuen (LP – Edo South), dismissed the petition, saying that it was “dead on arrival.”  
  
Imasuen, who spoke during a meeting of the Committee, said the Committee cannot consider a matter that is already before a court of competent jurisdiction.  
  
The spokesman of the Senate, Senator Adeyemi Adaramodu, Chairman Senate Committee on Rules and Business, Senator Titus Zam and the Sergeant-At-Arms in charge of the Mace, Muktar Daudawa testified before the committee on issues pertaining to the uproar that ensued over the reallocation of seat to Akpoti-Uduaghan by the Senate President last week.  
  
Imasuen lamented that despite the committee’s invitation to the Kogi Central senator and the general announcement made during plenary about the sitting of the committee fixed for yesterday, Akpoti-Udughan shunned the meeting.  
  
Imasuen said: “In the plenary, on the floor of the Senate, Distinguished Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan presented a petition before the Senate and there were a lot of objections to that petition because of the manner in which it came.  
  
“But in the wisdom of the Senate President, it was still referred to this committee and for us to save time because we need to report back to the Senate in a few days, I will address that petition.  
  
“But I will go through our rules and our standing orders as amended. That petition, for what was read on the floor and for what I’ve seen, is making some allegations that are already in court and it is the procedure of this committee, as a matter of fact, the first thing we ask when a petition comes before us is whether or not that petition is before any law court.  
  
“If the answer is yes, we do not touch such petition. In addition to that, our Rule Book also, under Order 40, has also laid down the processes that must be followed before a petition is laid and if you will allow me, Order 40 of our Rule Book, Sub-section 4, says that ‘no Senator may present to the Senate a petition signed by him or herself.’  
  
In other words, I cannot submit a petition about myself, signed by myself. That petition ought to be presented by another Senator and I’m sure that there are three Senators from Kogi State, as it is with other states.  
  
“Or any other Senator could have obliged her to present that report and that was not done. That’s a direct contravention of our Rule Book.  
  
“…I’m not going to go into the issue of the sitting arraignment. This committee will meet after this public hearing, and to take a decision on all of that.  
  
“But that report (Natasha’s petition), we will not even touch it, because it’s a matter before the court and on top of it, I went to the office as I left the chambers, and I found a notice from M.J. Numa and Partners. They say they are attorneys and transaction advisers.  
  
“They have presented to me a motion and an enrolment of order from the court attempting to stop this committee from doing its work. This is unacceptable. Indeed, we should actually let the world know that there is what they call separation of powers in our Constitution.  
  
“The judiciary, like I just told you, if there’s a matter before them, we do not touch those matters. We know, as parliamentarians, what our rights, privileges are and one of those things is we moderate what we do in the Senate.”  
  
“It is not subject to any court and so in the Senate, whatever happens there happens within the Senate and not subject to any other court. The issue before us today is the issue of an alleged misconduct of one of our distinguished senators on the floor of the Senate.  
  
“There are rules that guide such conduct and such behaviour. It is not subject to any court outside this committee. So, we do not actually pay much reference to this (court) order that came.”