Sexual harassment: Senate dismisses Natasha’s petition, Kogi senator shuns panel

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The Senate on Wednesday dismissed the sexual harrassment petition filed by Kogi lawmaker, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, against the President of the Senate, Godswill Akpabio, describing it as ‘dead on arrival.’  
  
The red chamber described her action as a violation of the Senate Standing Rules.  
  
This is as Akpoti-Uduaghan shunned the Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions which was conducting a review of her face-off with Akpabio over sitting arrangements in the senate.  
  
The kogi senator had in an interview on Arise Television alleged that Akpabio made sexual advances towards her during a visit to his residence in his home state of Akwa Ibom on December 8, 2023.  
  
She alleged that Akpabio held her hand, led her around his house, and made sexual advances towards her while her husband was trailing behind them.  
  
She further claimed that Akpabio had, on a separate occasion, asked her to ‘make him happy’ if she wanted her motions to receive seamless consideration on the floor of the Senate.  
  
The allegations came days after the Senate unanimously voted to refer her to the Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions for protesting the new sitting arrangements in the upper chamber.  
  
But the Senate President denied the sexual harassment claims during Wednesday’s plenary, stating that he has the highest respect for women.  
  
He described the allegation as false and baseless.  
  
“On February 20, 2025, some spurious allegations were making the rounds on social media and on television of purported harassment by Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan. While I am aware that the matters are in court; I would like to state clearly that at no time did I ever attempt any sexual harassment.  
  
“I have my siblings who were raised very well by my late single mother through very difficult times. She died in the year 2000. I, therefore, have the highest regard for women.  
  
“I also wish to say that I have four beautiful daughters; at no time will I ever harass any woman. I never did 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. In conclusion, I urge all Nigerians, particularly the media and members of the social media, to await the court’s decision. Please do not jump to conclusions on this allegation,” he pleaded.  
  
Shortly after the commencement of plenary, Akpoti-Uduaghan formally submitted a petition to the Senate which was referred to the Committee on Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions by Akpabio.  
  
The Chief Whip of the Senate, Mohammed Monguno, described her action as a violation of the Senate Standing Rules.  
  
Citing Rules 40 (1-7), he stated, “A petition may only be presented to the Senate by a Senator, who shall affix his name at the beginning thereof.  
  
“A Senator presenting a petition shall confine himself to a brief statement of the parties from whom it came, the number of signatures attached to it and the material allegations contained in it, and to read the prayers of such petitions.  
  
“All petitions shall be ordered, without question being put to lie upon the Table. Such petitions shall stand referred to the Public Petitions Committee.  
  
“No Senator may present to the Senate a petition signed by himself.  
  
“Senate should not receive or tolerate any matter to which actions are pending in any court of law.”  
  
Supporting the position, the Leader of the Senate, Opeyemi Bamidele (APC, Ekiti) stated that the Senate would lay a bad precedent if it went ahead to entertain Akpoti-Uduaghan’s petition.  
  
Nodding in agreement, Akpabio said, “There’s a reflection by Senator Mongunu who has served for 16 years as a member of the House of Representatives and was also Chairman of the Committee on Judiciary and Legal Matters. It is relevant. For those of you who may have doubts, after this, you can request from the Clerk the Standing Orders of the Senate and look at Rule 40, sub-sections 4 and 7.  
  
However, the petitioner interjected, citing a matter of privilege.  
  
“I believe here, sir, that your denial, your refusal to accept and treat my petition before the Senate Committee on Ethics and Privileges is an abuse of my privileges, and I say that this matter is not yet before any court of law.  
  
“The matter before the court is on the defamation and cyberbullying statements made by your Special Assistant on New Media, Mr Patrick Udom, who addressed my decent outfits as transparent, thereby depicting that I walked seductively and naked to the chambers. That is the nature of the petition, of the case in court.  
  
“This petition (brandishing a copy) has never been filed. The petition that alleges, or should I say, accuses you of making sexual harassment moves, abusing your office, and making malicious obstructions to my legislative functions, has not been tendered anywhere or before any courts in Nigeria.  
  
‘’So, sir, I would appreciate it if you kindly accept my petition and forward it to the Ethics and Privileges Committee so it could be treated,” she said.  
  
The Chairman of the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions, Neda Imasuen, lsubsequently dismissed her petition, describing it as dead on arrival.  
  
He also dismissed the order of a Federal High Court in Abuja attempting to restrain the Senate from subjecting the Kogi senator to any disciplinary measures.  
  
He spoke at the maiden sitting of the Ethics, Privileges and Public Petitions Committee on Wednesday.  
  
However, Akpoti-Uduaghan was absent and no presentation was made on her behalf.  
  
According to him, since Akpoti-Uduaghan had filed a sexual harassment case in court against Akpabio, the committee could not entertain her petition on the subject matter.  
  
The panel chair said the Kogi Central Senator did not probably honour the committee’s invitation basd on her lawyers’ advice.  
  
He said the judiciary cannot interfere in the affairs of the legislature, hence the court order obtained by Akpoti-Uduaghan was not binding on the committee.  
  
Imasuen said, “In the plenary on the floor of the Senate, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan presented a petition before the Senate.  
  
“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 us, to this committee.  
  
“And for us to save time because we need to report back to the Senate tomorrow (today), I will address that petition. But I will go through our rules and our standing orders as amended. That petition, from what you read on the floor and from what I’ve seen, is making some allegations that are already in court.’’  
  
According to him, “The matter is already in court. It is the procedure of this committee. As a matter of fact, the first thing we ask when the 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 petitions. In addition to that, our Rule Book, 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, subsection 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.  
  
“The issue before us today is the issue of alleged misconduct of one of our distinguished senators on the floor of the Senate.  
  
“The petition she presented today is actually dead on arrival. I say that because it runs contrary to Order 40, Subsection 4, that no Senator should present to the Senate, a petition signed by him or herself. And that petition, having been signed by her, will not be entertained by this committee.’’  
  
Expressing his disappointment over the Kogi lawmaker’s absence, Imasuen said, “Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan was duly invited to this hearing. We have been waiting, but unfortunately, she is not here. I hope that before we conclude this procedure, she will join us.  
  
“Every petition is referred to us by the entire Senate, and the Committee has the authority to deliberate on such matters. In this case, the issue was brought before us on February 25 by Senate Spokesperson, Senator Yemi Adaramodu, nothing more, nothing less.  
  
“The court order is unfortunate. We have the privilege to sit and address issues that affect the Senate and that is exactly what we are here to do,” he further said.  
  
Speaking further, he noted, “She is not here. Now I can understand why she’s not here. She’s probably not here on the order of her lawyers.  
  
“That being the case, the committee will sit and we will deliberate on what we’ve gotten from distinguished senators who have presented their cases before us.  
  
“We will use our rule books and all other documents that are available to us, to make a decision here and then make a referral to the full Senate”  
  
Senate spokesman, Yemi Adaramodu (APC, Ekiti South) and Titus Zam (APC, Benue North-West) also took turns to testify against Senator Natasha.  
  
In his presentation before the committee, the Head of the Serjeant-At-Arms in the chamber, Mr Muktar Daudawa, explained that the issue of seat reallocation was a normal routine in the chamber and that Akpoti-Uduaghan was not the only senator affected.  
  
Justifying the dismissal of the Kogi lawmaker’s petition on Channels Television, Senator Adaramodu said, “It’s just content creation, and then when there is content creation, the media will feast on it. That is what is happening, in any climate, even outside Nigeria, there have always been, maybe, little uproar, here and there, little bruohaha, up, here, and there. So some people, like our younger generation, will say they are catching their cruise. I see this one as that. Maybe our own senator sister is just catching her own cruise.”  
  
He pointed out that senators cannot raise a point of order if they are not in order themselves.  
  
Adaramola further explained that, “until you are properly seated, according to Order 6-2, Order 6-B of our standard rules, that you cannot make a contribution. Either it is on privileges, it is on rights, or it is on anything. You cannot make any contribution. So she was prevented from making a contribution.  
  
“And then when you are prevented from making a contribution, She was still shouting. It was the prerogative.It is there in our order that the presiding officer can order you out. But instead of the presiding officer ordering her out, other senators prevailed. While the presiding officer, that is the senate president, that he should not do that.  
  
“So, she was given the opportunity to even sit down on the wrong seat throughout the meeting of that day. So after that, like I said, you cannot ask for a point of order when you are not in order.”  
  
In response to a question about the potential negative impact on the Senate’s corporate image, Senator Adaramodu clarified that the Senate’s image remains intact and assured that the matter would be resolved peacefully.  
  
Meanwhile, the Federal High Court in Abuja has given the National Assembly a 72-hour ultimatum to justify why it should not be restrained from probing the Kogi Central Senator over alleged misconduct.  
  
While delivering a ruling on an ex-parte application brought before the court by Akpoti-Uduaghan’s legal team, led by Mr Sanusi Musa (SAN), Justice Obiora Egwuatu ordered the Clerk of the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Committee to, within 72 hours of receiving the court’s order, show cause why an interlocutory injunction should not be issued to stop them from probing the plaintiff for alleged misconduct without affording her the privileges stipulated in the 1999 Constitution, as amended, the Senate Standing Order 2023, and the Legislative Houses (Powers and Privileges) Act.  
  
The court also granted Akpoti-Uduaghan permission to serve the Originating Summons and accompanying processes on all defendants through substituted means by handing same to the Clerk of the National Assembly who was cited as the 1st Defendant, or by pasting same on the premises of the National Assembly and publishing same in two national dailies.  
  
The court ordered the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions to stop the disciplinary action that was instituted against Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
Egwuatu said he took judicial notice of an affidavit of urgency that was attached to the application, as well as depositions that were personally made by Senator Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
The ex-parte injunctions, which were issued on Tuesday, with the enrolled order obtained on Wednesday, read: “It is hereby ordered as follows: An order of this Honourable Court is made granting leave to the Plaintiff/Applicant to serve the 2nd – 4th Defendants/Respondents with the Originating Summons and all other accompanying processes in this Suit by substituted means, to wit: by serving same through the 1st Defendant (Clerk of the National Assembly) or pasting same on the premises of the National Assembly and publishing same in two national dailies.  
  
“An Order of Interim Injunction of this Honourable Court is made restraining the 2nd Defendant/Defendant’s Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Code of Conduct, headed by the 4th Defendant, from proceeding with the purported investigation against the Plaintiff/Applicant for alleged misconduct, sequel to the events that occurred at the plenary of the 2nd Defendant on the 20th day of February 2025, pursuant to the referral by the 2nd Defendant on the 25th of February 2025, pending the hearing and determination of the Motion on Notice for interlocutory injunction.  
  
“An order of this Honourable Court is made directing the 1st – 4th Defendants to show cause within 72 hours upon the service of this order on them, why an order of interlocutory injunction should not be granted against them, restraining them from proceeding with the purported investigation against the Plaintiff for alleged misconduct without affording her privileges as stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended), the Senate Standing Order 2023, and the Legislative Houses (Powers and Privileges) Act.”  
  
In a related development, scores of Akpoti-Uduaghan’s supporters Wednesday marched peacefully to the National Assembly gate, demanding the immediate resignation of the Senate President.  
  
The protesters waved banners with various inscriptions: ‘Akpabio must resign now,’ ‘Leave Natasha for her husband,’ and ‘We are Egbiras, we are not playing,’ among others.  
  
They were, however, prevented from accessing the NASS complex by a team of policemen and other security agencies.  
  
Also, a group, the Kogi Central Concerned Stakeholders, publicly dissociated themselves from the actions of the Kogi lawmaker, expressing disappointment over her ongoing conflict with Senate President.  
  
In an open letter addressed to the Senate President on Wednesday, the group condemned the senator’s conduct, which they say has become a source of public concern and division.  
  
In the letter signed by the Convener Abdulraheem Adeku, the stakeholders expressed regret over the senator’s behaviour, particularly her public attacks on the Senate President, which they argue have escalated into an unnecessary dispute.  
  
They emphasised that as an esteemed institution, the National Assembly’s rules should be upheld, and such personal grievances should not undermine its integrity.  
  
“We the Kogi Central Concerned Stakeholders have observed with utmost dismay the ongoing brickbat between the Senate President, distinguished senator Godswill Akpabio and the senator representing Kogi Central, Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan and wish to firmly dissociate ourselves from the unfolding events that have become a national concern.  
  
“As a revered institution of government, there is no gain in saying that the National Assembly has standing rules that must be obeyed as an integral part of keeping the order but we regret to note in absolute terms that a matter that has to do with a simple compliance to rules has degenerated to a vitreous attack on the personality of the distinguished senate president, Godswill Akpabio,” the letter read.