

**ACCESS TO JUSTICE HAILS THE SUSPENSION OF JUSTICES NARON and
ARCHIBONG By the NJC
Press Statement by Access to Justice**

News of the suspension of two Judges, namely Justice Naron of the High Court of Plateau State and Justice Charles Archibong of the Federal High Court, Yenogoa did not only come as a very welcome development, it immensely raised the hope of both justice sector observers and all Nigerians who, in recent times, have begun (and justifiably so) to identify the judiciary as a major drawback to Nigeria's drive towards a stable, just and progressive constitutional democracy in the world. Access to Justice commends the Chief Justice of the Federation, The Hon Justice Aloma Marian Mukhtar for her courage in leading the National Judicial Council (NJC) on a path-finding direction – away from what was fast appearing like a faltering loss of focus, gross ineptitude and such patent partisanship in “shouting” matters of judicial integrity that almost supports the impression that judicial integrity fared better without an NJC.

Access to Justice had within the last two years noted with deep concerns the dwindling public confidence in the judiciary following bizarre acquittals of corrupt politicians like in the James Ibori's case, gross compromises of judicial ethic's like Justice Naron's story over the Oyinlola/Aregbesola election case, laughable sentences over serious issues of corruption like the Justice Talba's decision over Alhaji Yusuf/the police pension fund case, the reckless and suspect abuse of judicial procedure like the cases involving Justice Archibong and, above all, the Katsina-Alu/Salami dispute over the Sokoto Election Tribunal. All these instances of gross and disturbing malfeasance and their many other antecedents within the last 14 years of democratic re-start (like the “impeachment” sagas of 2003 – 2007) conduce to expose the underbellies of an institution which though dawns the honour and dignity of “Honourable Justice”, detracts considerably from its exalted state by conduct and character.

For Access to Justice, what makes the latest suspension of Justices Naron and Archibong worthy of commendation is the heartening departure by the Aloma Mukhtar-led NJC from the multiplied frustration (suffered by AJ and other justice-sector activists) of unheeded petitions to the NJC over cases of judicial corruption and abuse of office. Notwithstanding this salutary intervention over Justices Naron and Archibong, it is sad to observe that it took the NJC five solid years (2008 – 2013) of what would rightly be described as cryptic investigation of allegations of misconduct to deal decisively with the Access to Justice's petition over the proven communication pendente lite between Justice Naron and one of the parties to the Osun State election dispute, over which the Judge presided. If the records can be reached, one will not be surprised to observe that the cases against Justice Archibong may have been pending before the NJC for such a long time that the petitioners may have long forgotten the content and substance of their scripts. The reader's guess as to the spirals of public apathy and complacency resulting from this (over making correctional recourses to the NJC) cannot be farfetched.

If time, as they say, is of the essence of justice, the NJC must fit the bill of speedy adjudication in the overall interest of saving the judiciary from the sliding vacation of public confidence. What makes this need imperative is the growing suspicion that interventions appear to be deliberately manipulated to fall within a few months prior to a

culprit Judge's retirement. The timelines within which meetings are summoned, investigative committees are set up and suspect Judges are interrogated are not only worrisome, but the interrogation of such culprit Judges behind iron curtains and/or by committees in which they sit as serving members (like the Abia's Justice Ama v CRAN Members case of 2003 – 2004) purges the investigative process of any iota of integrity.

AJ celebrates Chief Justice Aloma Marian Mukhtar's resolve and action in beginning a process of navigating the judiciary ship away from the iceberg of public mistrust – a phenomenon that has left the Bar poorer and the public disenchanted.