

## **CORRUPTION AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the nagging phenomenon of corruption and political leadership in Nigeria. It argues that while it is indeed a global challenge, its prevalence, persistence and gravity differs from country to country. Over the years in Nigeria, the crisis of corruption seems to have defied all the possible solutions by Governments aimed at taming the scourge. It has shown so much resilience that it seems to have become a culture in the country. Also, the lack of strong and purposeful political leadership affects everything and is responsible for corruption in the system. Leadership style plays a key role in uplifting any human society or holding down the wheel of progress. The paper proposes an individual and corporate commitment to the banishment of corruption and a value based political leadership in Nigeria as a way forward for her development. In Nigeria, there is the need for a political leadership that would identify and apply common societal values to governance, build on those values and thereby add value to the society.

**Key Words: Corrupt Practices, Political class, Societal problem, Nigeria, Remedy.**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Corruption is a global phenomenon and the challenge of corruption and political leadership remains one of the most debilitating issues facing Nigeria today. It is as old as society itself and cuts across nations, cultures, races and classes of people. Corruption is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges of our time, a challenge that is not only leading to impoverishment and loss of lives but also threatening the stability of society. The only difference is that prevalence, gravity and persistence of the corruption menace vary from one country to the other. The effects of corruption are always negative. It blocks and frustrates genuine efforts at development. It also leaves its victims literally gasping for breath.

Corruption is one human vice that requires immediate and proactive measures to tackle. Given its damaging nature, it is not a problem whose solution is put off to another day. That is exactly why most countries have in place strong institutions charged with tackling the menace head-on. In Nigeria, the challenge of corruption has been discussed, examined, and dissected at various fora: seminars, symposiums, high-powered committees, and in the media (Egwemi, 2012, Ibrahim, 2003).

No doubt, all these concerted efforts have been made so that lasting solutions to the problem can be found. However, the problem of corruption is intractable and as we have argued earlier seems to have defied solution (Egwemi, 2007). This intractability of the problem is captured by Mundt and Aborishade thus, “each political regime comes to power promising to eliminate the practice and punish offenders only to fall into the same pattern” (Mundt and Aborishade, 2004:707).

In Nigeria today, metaphorical allusions like “kick back”, “bottom power”, “scratch my back”, “long leg”, “chop chop” are all euphemisms for corrupt practices. It is on record that every government that has come to power has pledged that, “there would be no sacred cows” and that it would “not be business as usual” (Nwezeh, 2011; Egwemi and Usman, 2010). Such promises have not done much to stem the tide of corruption and the phenomenon seems to have become a culture in the country.

Worthy of note is the contributory role played by the political class in Nigeria. Leadership style plays a key role in uplifting any human society or holding down the wheel of progress. There is lack of strong and purposeful political leadership which invariably affects everything and is primarily responsible for corruption in the system. I call this leadership deficit. Both the individual and the government have a resolute commitment to make to see to the banishment of corruption in the Nigerian project.

It is against the above background that this paper attempts to come to terms with the nagging phenomenon of corruption and political leadership with a view to finding a lasting solution to it.

## **2. POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA**

This is a ruler that guides the people to achieve development visions or goals. It is critical to a country’s development. The first thing that comes to mind with the name ‘Nigeria’ is corruption and deception. For a good political leader to succeed, there should be a special emphasis on the leaders’ ethical behaviours, accountability, transparency, integrity, and professionalism while in office. Our bad national image has been cultivated and nurtured to maturity over the past decades by successive regimes in this country. Nigeria’s democracy is a government of contracts and contractors by the few and for the few while the people wallow in poverty and misery in the midst of plenty. Corruption is responsible for nearly all the pains that we now experience as a nation and as individual Nigerians. Corruption has crippled our economy, ruined our roads, health and educational institutions.

In Nigeria today, there is poor development because Nigeria’s political leadership has failed to work for social and economic transformation of the society. There is too high level of hypocrisy, insincerity and lack of integrity in the practice of our politics. There is need for the evolution of an acceptable code of values with sanctions and punishment clearly spelt out as guidepost to our politics, before the fruits of education and that of economic development can become available to the people. Poverty continues to hold the society hostage. We need to expunge the term, ‘the Nigerian factor’ from our national lexicon and we need to outlaw the practice of garrison politics in the name of self-serving ‘consensus politics’ that takes on prisoners in the name of democracy. In the words of the ascetic and sage Mahatma Gandhi, he finally warned Nigerians of eight deadly monsters.

- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Worship without sacrifice
- Politics without principle
- Right without responsibility

Amid corruption in Nigeria, vision, policy, plan, politics, principle, conscience, wealth, commerce, pleasure, sports, knowledge, science, worship and morality are all corrupt. In its thirteen years of existence, the Independent Corrupt Practices (and other related offences) Commission, ICPC, has remained a toothless bulldog, having very little to show as evidence of its success in the war against corruption. It almost watches like a spectator in the war against corruption. On the other hand, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, another anti-graft agency, faces enormous challenges from indicted former public office holders, who use their loots to buy their ways to freedom.

Abandoned development programmes and policy summersault are common problems that militate against development in Nigeria. They are products of corruption and political leadership ineptitude the characterize the country. Corruption in Nigeria rubbishes good development dreams, visions, policies and plans, and keeps development crawling. Therefore, for any meaningful development to take place and root in Nigeria, corruption must first be fired by the political leadership who initiates, breeds and perpetuates it.

### **3. THE PROBLEM OF CORRUPTION**

The word corruption is originally from the Latin Verb *rumpere* which means to break (Abdul – Ismail, n.d). Following from the above, corruption means the breaking of a certain code of conduct for the personal benefit of the perpetrator. Many definitions of corruption have been put forward. For example, Sen. defines it as the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit (in Aluko 2009:2) Osoba defines it as “an anti –social behaviour conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms, and which undermines the capacity of authorities to improve the living conditions of the people” (in Aluko, 2009:3) The World Bank defines corruption as: The abuse of public offices for private gains. Public office is abused for private when an official accepts, solicits, or extorts a bribe. It is also abused when private agents actively offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantages or profit. Public office can also be abused for personal benefit even if no bribery occurs, through patronage and nepotism, the theft of state assets, or the diversion of state resources (in Agbu, 2003:3).

In J.S. Nye’s classical definition, corruption is “behaviour that deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains” (Nye, 1967:416). What we can deduce from the definitions above is that corruption entails any behaviour that deviates from accepted norm especially in the public space. It is any behaviour that goes against established rules, regulations, and established procedure. In short, corruption is behaviour that breaks the law or aid and abets breaking the law. Such

behaviour usually confers undue and/or unmerited advantages on the perpetrator. Such behaviour also expresses the notion of a betrayal of trust especially in a democracy where public office is held in trust for the people.

Corruption has various forms and dimensions. Aluko has identified nine forms namely:

- Political corruption (grand)
- Bureaucratic corruption (petty)
- Electoral corruption
- Bribery
- Fraud
- Embezzlement
- Favouritism
- Nepotism (Aluko, 2009:5)

What is important, however, is that in whatever form it manifests, corruption perverts public interest and unlawfully elevates private gain an advantage.

#### 4. IMPACT OF CORRUPTION

Corruption has a lot of negative impact on every sphere of societal development: social, economic and political (Igbuzor, 2008). As Ikubaje (2004) has argued, corruption is a global phenomenon and its effects on individual, institutions, countries and global development have made it an issue of universal concern (Igbuzor, 2008). According to the Lima Declaration, the impacts of corruption include: the erosion of the moral fabric of society, violation of the social and economic rights of the poor and vulnerable, undermining of democracy, subversion of the rule of law, retardation of development and denial of society, particularly the poor, denial of the benefits of free and open competition (Igbuzor, 2008).

Bello-Imam (2004), in the same vein has outlined the negative consequences of corruption to include:

- i. Retardation of Economic Growth:** Corruption lowers investment and retards economic growth.
- ii. Misallocation of Talent:** Where rent seeking proves more lucrative than productive work, talent will be misallocated. People will be lured to rent seeking rather than productive work.
- iii. Limitation of Aid Flows:** Where corruption is rampant, donor agencies are unwilling to put in their money.
- iv. Loss of Tax Revenue:** Revenue is lost through tax evasion or claiming improper tax exemptions.
- v. Adverse Budgetary Consequences:** When corruption is rampant budgeted amounts will not deliver the required services.
- vi. Negative Impact on Quality of Infrastructure and Public Services:** When public contracts are procured through a corrupt system, it results in lower quality of infrastructure and public services.

**vii. Negative Composition of Government Expenditure:** Corruption often tempts government officials to choose government projects less on the basis of public welfare than on the opportunity they provide for extorting bribes. Under such a situation, large projects, whose exact value and benefit are difficult to monitor, usually present lucrative opportunities for corruption while returns on teachers' salaries and textbooks could be zero for the same set of officials.

As the Chairman of Transparency International, Peter Eigen correctly noted, corruption doesn't just line the pockets of political and business elites; it leaves ordinary people without essential services such as life saving medicines and deprives them of access to sanitation and housing. In short, corruption costs lives (See Igbuzor, 2008:12-16). Therein lies the problem of corruption. It negatively affects any country's development drive.

## **5. CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA**

Corruption is as old as civilization itself and in the particular case of Nigeria, it is as old as the history of the country itself (Aluko, 2009). Omotola traces corruption to colonialism. He argues that by all standards, colonialism in Nigeria was built on corruption. This is to the extent that "because of the colonialist's corrupt disposition to exploit the state for their exclusive benefit, they liquidated social structure against corruption associated with pre-colonial Africa and replaced and or transformed them to their own purposes" (Omotola, 2006:217).

The colonial era was characterized by allegations of corrupt practices against civil servants and police officers (Aluko, 2009). This colonial legacy of corruption was carried into the independence period. Chinua Achebe, the famous Nigerian novelist has highlighted the incidence of corruption in some of his novels, (Achebe, 1960, 1966, 1988). Achebe's literary presentation of corruption indicates the extent and damaging impact of the phenomenon on Nigeria and her people.

In Nigeria as indicated above, the incidence of corruption is quite high. Since the return to democratic rule in the country in 1999, the country has either been ranked first or second in global corruption rating by Transparency International. This has been a matter of deep concern for both ordinary Nigerians and the political leadership of the country. Before 1999, there were many attempts at stemming the spate of corruption in the country (Igbuzor, 2008). However, since 1999, there seemed to be a renewed determination to fight corruption. A number of anti-corruption bodies have been set up in this direction. For example the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). In spite of these agencies, corrupt activities and practices have continued in the country almost making nonsense of the activities of these agencies and the war on corruption. This is quite unfortunate because it seems to have become an established pattern. For example, according to Mundt and Aborishade "each political regime comes to power promising to eliminate the practice and punish offenders, only to fall into the same pattern" (Mundt and Aborishade, 2004:707). Such a scenario qualifies Nigeria, according to J.S. Omotola (n.d.:3), "to belong to the category of countries which Jeremy Pope classifies as those whose national integrity system has effectively collapsed". In fact as argued elsewhere, the problem of corruption in Nigeria seems to have defied solution (Egwemi, 2009).

The crisis of corruption in Nigeria is difficult to tackle because it seems, as some argue, to be part of the culture of the country as in many other developing countries (Egwemi, 2009, Igbuzor, 2008, Audu 2008). The argument is usually that:

What is regarded as corruption in Africa is a myth because it is expected that a beneficiary should show appreciation for a favour granted him or her. If a government official offers one a job or

contract, the beneficiary would be obliged to show appreciation either in kind or cash to the government official just as he would do to a village chief if granted a land to cultivate crops or build a house. Corruption is a myth because in our cultures bribery is another's mutual goodwill (in Igbuzor, 2008:9).

An attempt is made in the following section to proffer solutions to the nagging menace of corruption in Nigeria.

## **6. CONCLUSION: THE REMEDY AND THE WAY FORWARD**

The Nigerian public is highly ambivalent about the corruption problem, frequently complaining about it and condemning it, but generally resigned to its pervasive presence (Mundt and Aborishade, 2004: 7).

When confronted with a challenge, man attempts as much as possible to overcome such a challenge. But overcoming a challenge like corruption is definitely not child's play. This is much more so in a country like Nigeria where corruption seems to have become "a culture". In Nigeria, it would seem that not being corrupt is the aberration while being corrupt is the norm

Given the above scenario, governments over the years in Nigeria have attempted to stem the tide of corruption in the country. It would seem that the Nigerian government is serious about waging a war on corruption. Paradoxically it also seems that corruption seems to be very resilient in the country and as a corollary has persisted. Why has corruption assumed such a status in Nigeria and what can be done about it? It would seem on the surface that dealing with the problem of corruption is simple and straight forward. This is to the extent that once people decide to and begin to do things correctly, the elementary condition for corruption to thrive has been removed. However, it is not that simple especially when a phenomenon has taken root. Beginning to do things correctly becomes difficult since many people benefit from the status quo.

Secondly, dealing with corruption in Nigeria is supposed to be easy because there are institutions charged with fighting the scourge. In the last decade, the ICPC and EFCC have become household names in the country. In spite of these institutions, corruption has soared and has become intractable (Egwemi, 2009, 2010). Why is this the case?

According to Igbuzor (2008), there are six questions that should test the seriousness of any anti-corruption crusade (1) Is it systematic'? (2) Is it comprehensive'? (3) Is it consistent? (4) Does it have focus? (5) Is it well published? (6) Does it carry people along? According to him the Obasanjo administration failed on all these questions except for the fifth one. The rhetoric about anti-corruption was everywhere but the impact of the war was minimal (Egwemi, 2010, Igbuzor, 2008).

What then is the way forward? Many individuals, groups and organizations have identified certain important elements which can facilitate the taming of scourge called corruption. Some of these elements are:

- a. Legislative framework for transparent and accountable government and for fighting corruption including freedom of Information Act (FOI ACT), Budget law, fiscal responsibility law, Whistle blowers' Act etc.
- b. Political will and commitment to fight corruption

- c. Comprehensive strategy that is systematic, comprehensive, consistent, focused, published, non-selective and non-partisan.
- d. Protection of whistle blowers.
- e. Political Reform to curb political corruption
- f. Reform of substantive programmes and administrative procedures
- g. Mobilization for social re-orientation with participation of civil society and faith based organizations
- h. Effective parliamentary oversight through the Public Accounts Committee
- i. Independent media
- j. Adequate remuneration for workers to reflect the responsibilities of their post and a living wage
- k. Code of ethics for political office holders, business people and CSOs
- l. Movement for Anti-corruption (see Igbuzor, 2008:40-41).

The need to frontally confront corruption in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized...the desire by government over the years (and especially since 1999) to tackle the menace of corruption is clear, at least institutionally. However, the rhetoric of a war against corruption has not been matched by action... in spite of the avowed war against corruption, it seems to have soared in the country. (Egwemi, 2010:127).

In the light of the above, what appears or seems to be lacking in the war against corruption is the political will.

For the avoidance of any doubt, political will as used in this paper refers to the willingness by governments at all levels to genuinely fight corruption instead of dealing with it in a half-hearted manner. It would mean enthroning a regime in which there are no sacred cows, a system in which the law is applied to deal with corruption irrespective of who the culprit is.

A clear case of the lack of political will in the fight against corruption played out on 17 April 2012 with the conviction of former Delta state governor James Ibori on charges of corruption by the Southwark Crown Court in London.

Ibori's conviction in London came almost three years after he was acquitted of a 170-count charge of corruption by a Federal High Court in Asaba. Ibori's conviction in London has cast a long shadow on the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

Apart from Ibori many high profile individuals have been undergoing prosecution and the institutions do not seem to be serious about doing their job. The government therefore needs to rejig its anti-corruption war to give it credibility. It would also mean that the functionaries of the agencies in charge of the war on corruption are themselves above board. In this direction, the words of the chairman of the ICPC, Justice Emmanuel Ayoola readily comes to mind. According to him, the fight against corruption can succeed only if Nigerians at all levels, stop paying lip service to it, change their corrupt ways and embrace integrity, transparency and accountability as the only way forward to national honour and prosperity (in Dan'Azumi, 2009:21).

Political will, will also entail doing away with such things as plea bargaining which has become a veritable obstacle in the war against corruption. As Nigeria's former Chief Justice Dahiru Musdapher has argued concerning plea bargaining.

It has no place in our law – substantive or procedural. It was invented to provide soft landing to high profile criminals who loot the treasury entrusted to them. It is an obstacle to our fight against corruption. It should never again be mentioned in our jurisprudence (in Ogundele, 2011:6)

Nigeria's Senate President, David Mark has spoken out against plea bargain. According to him "... plea bargain has been used not to meet the ends of justice but to protect the big men in our midst". (Ojiabo and Onogu, 2012:9). What is therefore left is to go beyond the words to action. The entire arms of government taking such a position will strengthen the hand of law. In such a circumstances, instead of plea-bargain which amounts to only a slap on the wrist, corrupt individuals are made to face the full weight of the law.

Lastly, political will would mean that since there are institutions in place to fight corruption, the government of the day should allow them to operate without hindrance. A situation in which government intervenes with the work of the agencies or in which frequent changes are made in the leadership of anti-graft agencies will not conduce for a good fight against corruption. Political will, will also mean adoption of such "extreme" penalties like the death sentence which many Asian countries have used with high degree of success. (Egwemi and Usman, 2010). Corruption many times results in death of innocent people and so sentencing corrupt officials to death may not be extreme as it seems.

The second issue that Nigeria needs to examine in her war on corruption is that of good governance. Since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, the governments in place have shown a proclivity towards lawlessness and this has been a major impediment to the war against corruption in the country. (Egwemi 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Good governance is important because according to Omotola;

*...the greatest antidote to corruption is good governance. Whatever measures are put in place, these should be ones that promote good governance, accountability and control. This is the only framework that would allow for a reasonable degree of symbolic coherence between policy frameworks and their implementation (Omotola, 2006:226)*

Thirdly, there is the need to de-politicise the war on corruption for it to be effective. During the Obasanjo years, 1999-2007, the anti-corruption agencies were used as tools of vendetta to harass and intimidate real and perceived enemies of his government. To that extent it was thought that the former president's campaign lacked seriousness. In the build up to the 2011 general elections, the EFCC came up with an advisory list. The aim of the list was to stop certain individuals undergoing trail for graft from contesting the elections.

The EFCC as an agency should concentrate on doing its work of apprehending and prosecuting to a logical conclusion those accused of graft. It should not allow itself to be used as an agency of intimidation.

Furthermore, the advocacy for special courts to fight corruption needs to be seriously considered. It is clear that the judiciary in the country is burdened with many other civil and criminal cases which do not allow for expeditious treatment of corruption cases. Government may need to have special courts so that cases of corruption can be easily dispensed with.

Lastly, it has to be re-emphasized that tackling corruption is not a one-shot endeavour, but a challenging long-term undertaking (Ogundiya, 2009). As it has been augured elsewhere, the fight against corruption in Nigeria has to be consistent and sustained since it seems that corruption is part and parcel of Nigeria. The Nigerian government needs to move beyond the isolated and fire brigade approach currently adopted, it needs to march rhetoric with action in the war against corruption (Egwemi 2010). As a corollary it has to be emphasized also that the war on corruption is not a one man or one institution affair. In this wise, every Nigerian has a role to play. Also all relevant institutions must build a synergy in the fight against corruption. It is only when every individual and institution work together that corruption can be tackled in a holistic and all-embracing manner. It is then that the scourge will be tamed. Until the scourge of corruption is tamed efforts at national development will continue to be futile.

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