

# Leadership and Corruption: The Need for Institutional Control And Public Accountability in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Corruption is a malfeasance which thrives in an environment of weak institutional leadership. Despite mounting evidence and increased awareness in the fight against the scourge, it has largely become a social pandemic associated with leadership conundrum in various areas of public life. This paper is therefore a critical examination of the socio-cultural and system related factors that create opportunities for this deviant behaviour in Nigeria. It traced the nation's legacy of poor leadership to the pervasiveness of the grand scale corruption in the Nigerian society and further discussed the kleptocratic manifestation of the social ill which is obstructive to the national development and growth. On the basis of the submission, possible ways of mitigating the risk of the social menace were suggested. The paper concluded that if corruption is to be put on abeyance, the political leadership needs to be genuinely supportive in fostering a culture of resistance to the scourge by demonstrating unalloyed commitment to public accountability and strengthening reforms for improving institutional integrity across the nation's economy.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Leadership, Accountability, Transparency and Institutional Integrity

## 1. Introduction

Corruption has long plagued Nigerian society and the social ill has become the most challenging obstacle to the socio-economic transformation of the nation. Apart from being widespread, it is persistent and endemic (Adeyemi, 2004). Everywhere you go, you can actually observe and feel corruption. It is so pervasive that it permeates all aspects of the country's national life (Nnonyelu, Uzoh and Anigbogun, 2013). In Nigeria, corruption has now largely become an intractable social pathology manifesting in a multitude of ways, morphing into new shapes and thriving unabatedly as a result of infirmless leadership. It is encountered in the routine processes of governance both in public and private sectors and it pollutes the business environment generally (Okechukwu and Inya, 2011). This absurd situation underscores the poverty of leadership in Nigeria.

According to Ebegbulem (2012), leadership is about integrity and trust, but the main obstacle facing contemporary Nigeria is insincerity and insensitivity of the political leaders to the need of the masses whom they have been elected to serve. Consequently, most of the national problems facing Nigeria as a country today are attributed to leadership deficit. The state of affairs of the nation is routinely dominated by lack of accountability and degeneration of officialdom in the public office. It is a common aphorism that in war where the Generals are interested in looting and not in fighting, the Commanding Officers may not be interested in definite victory or winning. This disposition sums up the case for understanding the inexorable link between leadership and aegian state of corruption, which is grossly negative in Nigeria. The lack of strong leadership affects every segment of the country's socio-economic structure and is responsible for the corruption-crisis in the nation's system.

Ogundele and Akewusola (2006) summed up leadership functions under three broad categories: first, coping with change and setting. Second, aligning people and third, inspiring and keeping people moving in

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the right direction despite obstacles to change by appealing to basic untapped human needs, values and emotions. But, the common place practice by the Nigerian leaders is the prescription of the precepts and doing of the contrast by these leaders. Each political leaders that come into power, promises to eliminate corruption and punish offenders, only to fall into the same pattern (Mundit and Aborisade, 2004). This abnormal condition has exacerbated the flourishing of the social malfeasance as a viable enterprise in the country, because it represents the greed of the political leadership in public offices in the country. Nigeria's high vulnerability to corruption thus stems from the cynicism and unwillingness of the political leaders to sincerely eliminate the cancerous cankerworm in the main socio-economic fabrics of the public life.

Undoubtedly, what Nigeria lacks as a nation is a value-based leadership. That is, leadership that would genuinely strengthen deep reforms for improving institutional integrity, identifying and applying ethical societal values to governance. Experience to date has shown that the country's legal and regulatory control structures, however sound, cannot by themselves ensure transparency, if the institutional leadership entrusted with their enforcement continues to abuse its power for selfish motive and personal aggrandisement. In most developed economies, bulkwarks against corruption lie as much with strong sense of probity and prudent management of public resources as well as with the institutions of accountability within and outside the government. Hence, the nation needs leadership with courage to confront the corruption bedevilling the country through the transformation of the Nigerian societies to a Nigeria society (Anah, 2012). The political leadership needs to acquire the necessary will-power and muster enough courage to manage the country by means of an institutional checks and balances.

Igwe (2012) observed that Nigeria today stands out unarguably as the heartland of systematic and other forms of corruption and the vicious circle is not structurally inhibited but occurs in all forms and at all levels of governance. To this end, the social ill has tainted the Nigerias' image internationally eroding investors; confidence in the economy with negative consequences for sustainable development. Akcay (2006) argued that corruption is a symptom of deep institutional weakness which leads to inefficient economic, social and political outcomes. As such, Nigeria as a nation has suffered profusely from development failure owing largely to high profile corruption of both the military and political leaders that have ruled the country. Until a reversal of this abnormal situation is made, it will be an arduous task and very difficult for the country to tame corruption and come out safely from the shackles of poverty. Currently, the institutional reforms on the abatement of corruption have proved ineffective, based on the nature of governance which remains largely patrimonial and unaccountable.

Given the persistent corruption in Nigeria, which has defied a plethora of contemporary integrity programmes, there is need for radical changes in the socio-cultural value system of the nation. In particular, there has been lack of consensus on how to effectively stem the scourge of corruption in the country. The formal rules against it seem unworkable and thus the fight against corruption becomes exacting and seemingly intractable in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the socio-cultural factors that have engendered opportunities for corrupt practices, traces the nation's legacy of poor leadership to the pervasiveness of the social problem in the country. It submits that the formal rules against corruption are largely capable of remission the social ills, but only bereft of strong and supportive governmental leadership with integrity. It therefore recommends a deep reform for strengthening institutional integrity and applying ethical societal values to governance in the country.

## **2. Analysis of the Concept of Corruption**

In the literature, corruption is defined in different ways by many authors. These definitions can be viewed from various angles, because what is seen as corruption varies from one country to another and takes on various forms and dimensions in various context. Given such situations, a universally shared definition of corruption will indeed be a daunting and challenging venture (Adenugba, 2009; Abdullah, 2008; and Ajibewa, 2006). Despite the divergent views on corruption, scholars generally agree that it is an aberration and bad social behaviour in any society (Olufayo, 2008; and Egweni, 2012). Thus, corruption is a cancerous

ailment, a socio-political, economic, religious and moral disease that spreads to all the different level of society. (Aluko, 2002).

According to Aluko (2009), corruption is referred to as an anti-social behaviour conferring improper benefit contrary to legal and moral norms and which undermines the capacity of authorities to improve the living conditions of the people. It is viewed as impairment of integrity, or moral principle and perpetration of evil vices against the societal well-beings. Abudullahi (2007) saw corruption as the diversion of resources for the betterment of the community to the gains of individuals at the expense of the community. These normative definitions of corruption are linked to two important elements: morality and authority, which in heuristic form only covers the extant meaning of corruption. They tend to individualize the social problem in terms of moral values and ignore the wider socio-political context of corruption.

Taagepera and Sandholtz (2005); Transparency International (2004), and World Bank (2000) gave a more widely acceptable definition of corruption as the abuse of public power for private benefits or misuse of public office for private gain. This definition is somehow broad in scope to include a wider perspective, behaviours such as bribery, use of reward to pervert judgement, bestowal of patronages by reason of ascriptive relationship values rather than merit, illegal appropriation of public resources for private uses, exploitation of the system, unconventional and fraudulent trade and undue use of authority, force or power. In the light of the implicit lack of consensus on the definitions of corruption among the scholars, we can state that it is a multi-faceted and flexible phenomenon which is characterised by a colossal dearth of regards for accountability, probity, order and good conscience in the transaction of public or private businesses and activities. It is also an integral part of poor governance and symptom of the moral indiscipline and moral decadence of the society Ajila and Adekoya (2005).

### **3. Theoretical Framework for Corruption**

Merton's anomie theory illuminates corruption as a social problem and establishes that a society that emphasizes material wealth as an important measure of success and at the same time restricts access to legitimate opportunities will inevitably engender a state of anomie. Anomie exists when there are no clear standards to guide behaviour in a given social life. Thus, the theory tacitly explains the reasons for the pervasive nature of corruption in Nigeria. Merton (1968) attributes corruption to a motivated behaviour that springs from violation of societal norms as a result of social pressure in order to meet the expectations and obligations from the social system. To this end, it is assumed that every society has standard codes of ethics and societal norms for running its affairs. The deviation from these societal codes of moral behaviour results not from the individual pathological personality but from the culture and structure of society (Merton, 1968).

From the conventional functionalist point of view, Merton argued that all societal members shared the same values and since members of the society are placed in different positions in the social structure, they do not have same and equal opportunity for accomplishing the shared values. This situation, according to him generates deviance behaviour which creates non-conformance to a given norm or set of norms which are accepted as standards to guide behaviours in a given area of socio-economic life. Honesty, integrity, diligence which are core values and moral prerequisites for a wholesome society would be thrown overboard. The resultant effect makes many people to reject the rules of the game in the society, that is, the normative values by criminally innovating their means to make ends meet. This gives rise to deviant behaviour which induces corruption and becomes a lifestyle. Today, a great majority of Nigerians are corrupt because most people in the country are oriented to the use of illegitimate means to acquire wealth. To them, any institutionalized means is legitimate as much as the end justifies the means. These members of the society spuriously engage in any illegal means in the bid to achieving the cultural defined goals which mutiates corruption.

### **4. Causes of Corruption**

Several reasons have been adduced by scholars for the multi-faceted causes of the phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria. Nwaobu (2004) posited greed and ostentation life-style as the potential root cause of

corruption. According to him, Nigeria must be only one of the few countries in the world where a man's source of sudden wealth is not of concern to his neighbour, the public or government. In essence, being corrupt in Nigeria is almost unavoidable as morality is relaxed, because to survive people would have to make money (Ciroma, 2004). The desperation of the Nigerian to acquire wealth through any dubious means contributed in no small measure to the prevalence of corrupt practices. The poor citizens in the country even venture into corruption in the bid to become rich and the rich people further indulge in the act, due to lack of contentment and fear of losing what they have. This socio-cultural indiscipline of materialistic social value involving a large number of people both at the top and bottom echelon of the structure of the society creates corruption in the country.

The present political environment and style of functioning of democracy also contribute to corruption. Nigeria as a country is presently run by a gang of kleptocratic and neo-patrimonial leaders. All the political parties, especially the ruling one, spend billions of naira to prosecute each election. This money comes from the political-economic set-up which provides undue opportunities for political leaders in power to make money through various illegal means. The money bag and wealthy business industrialists in the country also have their own vested interest in financing election and expecting in return huge contract award without recourse to due process. As such, in a system where there are deep institutional weaknesses and patronage is well entrenched, it would be a difficult task for the leadership to enforce measures against unethical standard in the transaction of government businesses. Corruption then becomes obvious.

The systematic factor that has further increased the risk of corruption in Nigeria is the weakness of social and governmental enforcement mechanisms. The weak character of the regulatory control of public institutions which are supposed to check corrupt practices often exacerbate the growth of corruption. The lack of transparency in their method of transaction makes it easy for perpetrators of corrupt practices to cover their tracks, thus, making unearthing of corruption very difficult. Relatedly, the untransparent system of decision-making, unilateral and unlimited executive decision to approve spending without reporting and doing what they like reduce opportunities for accountability and enable corruption to flourish. Such deviation from rational ethical value and principle of modern state contribute to institutional decay and thus create corruption in the country. The unclear or overlapping management responsibilities of the various regulatory control institutions such as Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt and other Related Practices Commission (ICPC) similarly contribute to corruption.

Sociological factors, such as customs, ethnicity otherwise known as tribalism, family pressures constitute another potential cause of corruption. The Nigerian society is characterized by the extended family system and close community structure. Pressure from family peers and community may impose difficult strains on the ethical dispositions of community members in positions of authority to bend rules and create corruption. Other critical factor is the poor wage and reward system in the country. Employees in the public sector of the economy are paid only starvation wage. Dandago (2008) observed that the poor salary level of most civil servants have not kept pace with inflation, which has eroded their purchasing power. They expect tips and bribes even for doing their regular and legitimate duties. When there are many corrupt individuals, it is optimal to be corrupt and once corruption is widespread, it will be persistent. (Mishra, 2006).

## 5. Legacy of Corruption

Corruption and abuse of power have long been features of Nigeria's economic and political landscape (Nna and Jacob, 2012). From the country's independence to the present leadership in governance, each of the successive regimes has its own share of corruption. Even the colonial era was characterised by allegations of corrupt practices against the civil servants and police officers (Aluko, 2009). However, the social malfeasance becomes an integrated aspect of the socio-economic and political life style of the nation with the military incursion into political governance. "*Between 1970 and 2004, more than 450 billion pound sterling in oil revenue flowed out from the Nigerian government coffers. But, much of it was looted by the kleptomania military bandit*" (Blair, 2005). It is no gainsaying that Nigeria as a nation has always been unlucky to have uninspiring leaders who revel in the attainment of the minimum, because more often than

not, leadership positions go to incompetents in the country. Those who rule Nigeria do not believe in the country (Dowden, 2010).

Thus, the major contributing factor to the growth of corruption in Nigeria are weak governance and widespread degeneration of leadership. These were the adduced reasons given by late Major Nzeogwu for the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966. The succeeding military regimes could not stem the tide of corruption and insatiate the good governance (Fagbadebo, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the Gowon administration which succeeded Major Nzeogwu was also alleged of corrupt practices. His military governors and senior government officials were alleged of various shady deals and abuse of power, which brought Muritala Mohammed / Olusegun Obasanjo to power in the country in 1976 before handing over to Shagari in 1979. The government of President Shagari was bedevilled with profligacy, wanton waste of resources and looting of the public treasury. As expected, General Buhari took over power from Shagari citing as justification the pervasive corruption in Shagari's administration.

The same story of corruption was given as excuse by General Babangida when he seized the mantle of leadership from General Buhari. His regime institutionalized the culture of corruption and made it a grand profile issue as Nigeria became the classic reference point of corruption. Babangida's administration refused to give account of the Gulf – war windfall estimated to be over 12.4 billion dollars and annulled the June 12 election, which was regarded as the only successful election in the annals of history of the country till 1993. Nwaka (2003) argued that corruption became fully legitimized during the Abacha's regime. Transparency International (2004) ranked General Abacha, as the fourth most self enriching political leaders and global kleptocrat of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who "stole" public fund of between 2 – 5 billion U.S Dollars. General Abdulsallam's short regime of activities was kept away from public view because he was reconstructing structures that brought democracy into the country.

This notwithstanding, the problem of corruption had become unsurmountable when Obasanjo took-over power from General Abdulsallam in 1999. President Obasanjo promised that under his administration, that nobody, no matter who and where, will be allowed to get away with the breach of the law or the perpetration of corruption. The niceties of his rhetoric had now become history. Although, President Obasanjo pursued the fight against corruption during his two-term tenure in office, many observers still believed that he was not sincere enough, because his Anti-corruption Agencies were used to side-line most of his critics and political opponents. Many of his advisers and aides were involved in corrupt practices under his leadership. Obasanjo's successor, President Umaru Yar'Adua came to power promising to reform and continue the anti-corruption vow, but his health and demise cut him short. The war on corruption in Nigeria has not been successful because government itself is neck deep in corruption especially of the political kind (Ovwasa, 2009).

The present administration in the saddle led by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan pledged to uphold Yar'Adua's reform agenda and to prioritize anti-corruption efforts. Many Nigerians and International communities have already rated President Goodluck very low in the fight against corruption. Various high grade corrupt practices ranging from the monumental fuel subsidy scam, flouting of public procurement procedures by highly placed public servants in the award of contracts to massive graft uncovered in the Pension administration as well as dirty activities at the Bureau of Public Enterprises and Securities Exchange Commission have taken place, still during the tenure of his government. Such criminal behaviours which are openly suggestive of grand scale kleptocratic tendencies are not strongly condemned but treated with outright levity and cynicism by the ruling class. This in fact caused the belated reaction and vituperation of President Obasanjo in his graphic documentation of the corruption quagmire in Nigeria to the Presidency in the tail end of 2013. Thus, the pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria owes its existence in full to the lukewarm attitudes and goals of the past and present political class and military dictatorship in the position of leadership in the country.

## **6. Combating Corruption: Institutional Strengthen of Public Accountability**

For long, Nigerians had witnessed various anti-corruption mechanisms as tools of abatement of corruption but all to no avail. It is true that the successive leadership in political governance in Nigeria has been putting in place anti – corruption strategies but only as a lip-service and often as response to media attention and some International agencies. During the second republic, President Shagari sponsored the ethical re-orientation campaign. The regime of General Buhari / Idiagbon introduced the War Against Indiscipline (WAI). Their successor in government, General Babangida established various committees on corruption and other Economic crimes. The Obasanjo's administration created various commissions: Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Code of Conduct Bureau for the political class, the Convent of Business Integrity (CBI). All these efforts are a façade of genuine measures to promote good governance through the eradication of corrupt practices (Kew, 2006).

Looking at the number of plethora control institutions created by the different leadership in governance, it is apparent that Nigerian government has the desire to eradicate the cankerworm. The political leaders only lacked the patriotic pledge of commitment to be more sincere in the fight against corruption. As long as those at the top echelon of governance are clandestinely aiding and abetting corruption, the anti-corruption drives and efforts made by them would continue to fail. The political leaders need to demonstrate unalloyed commitment to transparency and ensure deep institutional reforms to enforce public accountability as ways of running the affairs of the nation. There is the fundamental need to fortify the institutional checks and balances in all activities particularly on public financial management in Nigeria.

The basic component of any virile anti-corruption mechanism is the effective enforcement of the rule of law and principle of accountability at all level of governance in a country. It is the requirement, but hardly enough and sufficient to combat corruption with only legal and institutional regulatory control apparatus. Taming corruption necessitates good leadership with culture of sincerity and honesty to abhor double standard. Unless political leaders are prepared to surrender themselves by becoming accountable in public office, the multi-layered institutional control of corruption can hardly make a dent. The image of scared cows must be totally eradicated. Equality before the law must be applied to all and sundry irrespective of political status and social class. Presently, most of the political leaders in Nigeria lacked probity, fiscal discipline and prudent management of public resources. As such, it is highly imperative for them to ensure that all the processes of transactions of government businesses are open and transparent. These need to be entrenched as a way of life in public governance.

Relatedly, lack of integrity, half hearted investigation of corrupt practices and selective law enforcement wipe away credibility from government anti-corruption policies. The challenge is to strengthen the basic institutional control of good governance and administration in the public life of the country. The leadership must make sure that enforcement officers who are entrusted to execute the regulatory control of corruption are men and women of virtue and integrity, who recognise and always do what is right without caring whose ox is gored. There is also the need to strengthen agencies of confidence and stability that are the bulwark against arbitrary behaviours (Okuosi-Simbine, 2005). Exemplary governance and ethical re-orientation across the followers and leaders with deep institutional strengthening of public accountability are the antidotes which can only provide effective regulatory mechanism for remission of corruption in the country.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The paper argued that corruption is broadly a fraudulent, dishonest and illegal behaviour particularly of those in position of authority. The social ill is not necessarily an isolated event or an individual problem. It is a general problem and is globally declaimed but it is a by-product of any state's socio-economic, political and legal aspects as well as the roles of its institutional leadership. Corruption is a failure of institutional control over the perpetrators. Nigeria as a country has become for long a strong household of corruption. The endeavour to remedy this ugly situation rests solely on strong governmental leadership with vision and

integrity. The country already has put in place the necessary and required institutional framework to mitigate corruption. What is needed is the political will and courage on the part of the leadership to ensure the adequate strengthening of the country's institutional control of corruption. The law enforcement authorities need to be empowered to discern that laws are rigorously enforced without creating any double standard.

The multifaceted causes of corruption in the country suggest that successful anti-corruption programme must be targeted towards ensuring good governance. This is because the greatest anti-dote of corruption is good governance. The political leadership must apply ethical social values to governance in the country. Whatever the measures the government can put in place, they should be those about integrity, transparency, good conscience and the rule of law. Tackling corruption is not a one-short endeavour, but a challenging long term undertaking (Ogundiya, 2009). Nigeria as a country is presently neck deep in systemic, political and administrative corruption and the degenerating effect cannot be counteracted by a mere legalistic approach. Endemic corruption calls for a purposive, systematic and radical reform, a system of checks and balances and deep reforms for improving and strengthening of institutional integrity across all level of governance.

Simultaneously, the government must not rush to catch crooks, since combating corruption is fundamentally about addressing poor governance. The approach must be holistic and all-embracing involving the civil society, public servants, judiciary, law enforcement agencies and the governance. It must start anew with new value re-orientation to portray that the cankerworm is not part of the Nigerian culture and can be wished away. The implication is that government must first checkmate itself from benefitting from corruption. It also necessitates that the vicious cycle of corruption must be broken by government through the reduction of the high propensity of abuse of office and deviation from established standards and norms in the national life of the country. Leadership by precept, rather than example breeds scepticism in the people. This compels the political leaders to give the lead and set standard for themselves before requiring them of others. Except the country's leadership show positive disposition to be purgative of themselves of corruption and its many variants, the social malfeasance will continue to be a flourishing trade in the country.

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