CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF CAUSES, EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract
That corruption exists in Nigeria on a very large scale is no more news. More disturbing certainly are the effects of corruption on the larger majority of the Nigerian populace. The people have been severely impoverished because of the corrupt practices of the nations ruling political elites. It is in response to this alarming and disturbing situation that this paper takes a critical look at the issue of corruption in Nigeria. It examines the concept of corruption and attempts to encapsulate the plausible reasons for the escalating rate of corruption in the country. More fundamentally, it offers tentative suggestions on how the negative trend can be curbed. Amongst others, the paper suggests death penalty for public officers found guilty of corruption. An example with one will certainly keep others in check.

Nigeria became independent in 1960 after decades of exploitation and subjugation under British colonial rule. In the past fifty years of self-rule, the country has faced monumental problems. Rather than utilize self-rule for the benefit of the larger majority of Nigerians, the ruling elite has further impoverished the people.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria is a country that is blessed with abundant human and natural resources. At independence however, rather than diversify the productive base of the economy, the ruling elite abandoned agriculture which was the most important sector of the Nigerian economy then and concentrated on oil that was discovered in Olibiri a few years before independence.
The drift towards a mono-cultural economy by the Nigerian state a few years into independence certainly had implications. The fortune of the nascent state was then tied to oil and oil alone. In as much as we agree that this was a bad trend, the oil boom that followed a few years later created hopes and positive aspirations in the minds of majority of Nigerians. Unfortunately, the ruling elites could not convert the oil boom to development for Nigerians. Nigeria now ranks amongst the least developed countries of the world. Statistical record had showed over 40 percent of Nigeria’s population live on less than one dollar a day, The deplorable state of our roads which are now death traps for motorists, the high rate of unemployment, increasing poverty, penury and squalor are all indications of the failure of the ruling elites to transform the country. (Onuorah and Onyedike, 2004:22).

Over the years, scholars have offered various explanations for this ugly trend. Some have argued that the bad situation is caused by bad leadership. Others have contended that it is caused by political instability. Yet, some contend that it is caused by weak governmental structures. This paper takes a position on the above issue. It argues that Nigerians have been impoverished by the high level of corruption of its political elites. To do this, it then takes a general look at corruption with specific reference to its causes, effects and solutions.

Corruption: A Brief Conceptual Overview

The term corruption is perhaps one of the most common terms in discussion today. Yet, it eludes a one sentence definition. However, when seen it is easily identified even when it is not crafted in conceptual terms. Alatas (1990) sees corruption as the abuse of trust for the sake of private benefits. To Akinsoye-George (2000:9) corruption refers to all forms of improper or selfish exercise of power and influence attached to a public as well as private office. Nye (1967) sees corruption as behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private (regarding close family, personal, private clique) pecuniary or status gains, or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence. Dukor (2006:53) attempted to give a Nigerian definition when he said that corruption in Nigeria is the failure of the state to perform or live up to its moral and political status. For him in Nigeria, the state is the sole agent of corruption in all its political, business and economic ramifications.

Whatever else might be said, it is evident that corruption involves unlawful and, immoral behaviour, illegal accumulation of wealth, circumvention of established rules with the intention of personal gains and the misuse of public power for personal or private benefits.

Corruption: Causes and Effects

Scholars over the years have been interested in identifying the probable causes of corruption. It is generally agreed that corruption is caused by a combination of several factors. The factors include the fact that appropriate measures have not been put in place to punish corrupt citizens, great inequality on the distribution of wealth, poverty and low wages, absence of a strong or national community, poor reward system
and greed, the attractiveness of political offices as a vehicle for upward social mobility and the lack of ethical standards.

A major reason for corruption in Nigeria is the wide gap between the rich and the poor. Nigeria is a country where it is estimated that the majority of its citizens live on less than one dollar per day. Yet, it is disheartening to know that 25 percent of the federal spending is on the national assembly. It is estimated that a Senator gets close to one million naira per day (see Iredia, 2010:23). This can lead to corrupt practices at the level of the low citizenry.

It is also argued that corruption or criminality pays in Nigeria and so corruption can thrive. This is because the benefits far outweigh the costs. According to Igbinovia (2003: )

Nigerian society derives benefit from the existence of crime because the Nigerian clime works to maintain rather than to eliminate crime. Because in Nigeria crime seems to pay, because the benefits far outweigh the costs and often there are even no costs at all. Nigeria has become a society inhabited by criminals and their cohorts who breed, recruit and maintain ready and reliable supply of deviants and criminals.

Furthermore, it can be argued that corruption has and still exist in Nigeria on a large scale because of the absence of determined and purposeful political leadership. According to Chinweizu (1995:5), what allows for crime in Nigeria is the absence of political will to do what is both right and necessary. The point is no doubt very succinct. A look at the political history of Nigeria will reveal that our leaders could not have fought corruption frontally because they have also been involved. This makes them lack the political will and moral right to institute programmes and set up machinery that can help fight corruption. In fact, a former number two citizen of this country had no alternative but to accept this when he said categorically that “all of us are corrupt (Diya, 1994).

Another major reason for corruption in Nigeria is that political office is seen as the primary means of gaining access to wealth (National cake). This has been the reason why people contest for political positions and when they get there, they see the position as a means of gaining access to wealth or personal wealth under the pretence of representing their people. For example, Iyabo-Obasanjo-Bello who was involved in N300 million scam and refused to appear before the EFCC. Others are Patricia Eteh, former Speaker, House of Representative, Alamiesiegha, former Bayelsa Governor and Lucky Igbinedion former Governor of Edo state to mention but a few.

The need to have access to the national cake has always led to agitations for the creation of more states. It has been observed that the creation of states in Nigeria serves as a means of strengthening the economic and political positions of the power elite rather than serving as a means of achieving balanced development and national integration. According to Haruna (1980:537), in a society where political power is used as an avenue for economic privileges, both inter-class and intra-class struggles become the predominant features. In the case of a military regime, the inter-class struggle is suppressed through an increase in the use of brute force. Students’ demonstrations,
workers strike and peasants revolts are all put down by violence. The intra-class struggles usually take the form of electoral fraud, violence and conflicts among members of the same class competing for state power. The intra-class struggle is normally resolved in one of two ways – either by multiplying political offices to serve as concessions for the contending elite (the creation of states which is one of the strategies or through coup d’état.

The view that state creation is only an instrument in the hands of the elite to enhance their status was aptly captured by Ogunna (1983:372) when he contended that most of the demands for state creation are very frivolous and spurious and are not based on any known principle for the creation of states; rather they are based on selfish and particularistic considerations. Most of the agitators are motivated by the amount of the national cake which they expect to grab when their separate empires are created for them. For instance, in the former Bendel State, the issue of a new state (Delta) became a fundamental political point for the governorship hopefuls in lobbying for votes. The reasoning by the politicians was that unless an aspirant vociferously supported the need for Delta State, he ran the risk of losing votes from the politically advantageous Bendel South made up of eight local governments from which there was the desire for a state.

By and large, state creation in this respect would only mean additional governors, accelerated promotion of civil servants or bureaucrats of the newly created states and massive contract awards for the construction of official residential area offices. All these simply intensify the process of elite formation and illegal accumulation of public funds by our corrupt political elite.

Another factor responsible for corruption in Nigeria is the weakness of governmental enforcement mechanism. The methods of enforcing certain policies are very weak. A major example of the above was when the Federal Ministry of Information and Communication had to partner with the Department of International development (DFID) to enlighten the public on the seven-point agenda of President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua. Under the above partnership, it was agreed that DFID will provide funds for public education, advocacy and enlightenment on the agenda and also provide strategies for the power sector, economic and infrastructural reforms and health. By these developments, it simply implied that the Ministry of Information and Communication as a mechanism of government was weak.

Another major reason for corruption in Nigeria is the high level of poverty. In fact, the quest for development has been and still is one of the most critical issues in the Nigerian state. When the country gained independence amidst fanfare and jubilation on October 1, 1960, the belief was that independence would bring along with it development. The people were made to reason that the country would grow in leaps and bounds considering the fact that it was now under the control of the indigenous ruling elite. Unfortunately, the fanfare and jubilation did not last. A few years into the country’s independence, the country was hit by political instability that saw the restless alteration of political actors and a traumatic and fratricidal civil war. At the economic level, the oil boom that the country experienced in the 1970s did not change the economic fortunes of the people. In the 1980s, the economic problems of the country became manifest in increasing unemployment, skyrocketing prices of goods and
services, poverty, decreasing value of the naira, hunger, diseases and penury. To some scholars, this trend contributed immensely to the increasing level of corruption that the country has experienced over the years.

It is now pertinent for us to discuss the effects of corruption. Undoubtedly, the first effect of corruption is that it creates under-development in a country and thereby increasing the level of poverty and penury. Corruption implies that the natural wealth that ought to be used for developing the nation would be in few hands to the detriment of the larger majority of the people. Corruption reduces economic growth and also creates a high rate of unemployment by reducing foreign investment flow into the country. Under a corrupt government, the living standard of the people decreases.

Furthermore, corruption has fundamental implications for democracy in particular and governance in general. It is generally agreed that democracy is not safe in a corruption-ridden polity, and that a corrupt polity can never hold a free and fair election (Okoosi-Simbine, 2006:40). More importantly, it has been argued above that corruption creates poverty for the larger majority of the people and there is a negative relation between poverty and democracy. This point was succinctly made by Ojo (1985:169) when he contended that “democracy is not safe in a country where a large majority of the population are illiterates and poor”.

Okoosi-Simbine (2006:41) expanded and gave fuller expression to the above when she contended that:

*Other than poverty, corruption creates a sort of social stratification between the rich and the poor and hence alienates the masses of the people from the governments and makes them unwilling to practice, support and defend democratic ideals.*

Corruption scares foreign investors from a nation. Serious investors are always wary of offering bribes. This is because there is no guarantee that the greased officials may keep their side of the agreement and with no official cover, the redress in case of contract breach, the fleeced investor is on his own. It is also a fact that foreign investors are also prone to withdraw their capital from a country with high incidence of corruption because the risk of doing business in such a country sometimes far outweighs the benefits. In summary, corruption creates poverty and also cripples democratic desires and aspirations.

**Curbing Corruption: Some Suggestions**

To curb the trend towards the rather embarrassing and excessive rate of corruption in Nigeria, a good number of steps must be taken. The steps could be political, attitudinal and socio-economic. First, Nigerian leaders must be prepared to offer selfless service to the nation. They must begin to think of themselves as first and foremost, servants of the people. Until this takes place, the quest for material acquisition would not stop and this would not make room for the development of the Nigerian state.

Second, Nigerian leaders must through actions and attitudes place priority on the welfare of the generality of the populace. They must realize that they are there to serve the populace and until the populace realizes that they are doing just that, the country
would not make any meaningful progress; if the populace feels cheated by the leaders, then corruption is more likely to be widespread.

Third, it is recommended that a People’s Oriented Committee (POC) should be set up immediately to be made up of representatives from the rural areas where poverty is more disturbing. This committee should be charged with the responsibility of advising the government on programmes best suited for these areas. It must be emphasized at this point that the governments must be prepared to absorb major recommendations from this committee. This recommendation is quite germane if we realize the fact that we stated earlier that poverty is also a major cause of corruption in our society.

Fourth, there should be a fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian budget on the new social-economic order. The budget must reflect the urgent need of the masses rather than concentrating a large part on defence.

Fifthly, it must be admitted that unless productivity is improved, the quest for better life would remain an illusion. It is thus recommended that government should improve the productive base of the country by not only directly embarking on the production of goods and services (e.g. establishing and efficiently managing large firms and industries) but also by assisting individuals (especially the rural poor) in their productive endeavour through the provision of soft loans.

Sixth, it has been recognized clearly that in the Nigerian state, there is great inequality between the rich and poor. If corruption is to be ameliorated if not completely obliterated, there must be a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of government to reduce the gap. The above can be achieved through proper taxation.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, stricter and enforceable sentences must be placed on those guilty of corruption. A situation in which somebody that stole billions of naira from the state treasury is only jailed six months and given an option of fine of about 3 million naira makes corruption a very attractive enterprise. It is thus recommended that death penalty be placed on public officers found guilty of corruption. An example with one will deter other prospective corrupt officers.

Conclusion

Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian state has had to grapple with a multitude of socio-political and economic problems. At the political level, political instability has threatened the nation for the most part of its existence. At the economic level, the nation has moved in a topsy-turvy manner. There is also social and moral bankruptcy amongst the larger majority of its citizens. This paper has examined an aspect of the general problem of the Nigerian state which is corruption. It examined the concept, reasons for corruption and offered some tentative suggestions on how to escape from the problem of corruption. More fundamentally, it recommended death penalty for corrupt public officers.
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