



10.5281/zenodo.7421084

Vol. 05 Issue 11 Nov - 2022

Manuscript ID: #0752

REFLECTING ON THE PANDEMIC STATUS OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of corruption over years has been the bane of Nigeria and remains an unresolved social problem. Its upsurge is highly disturbing and has caused great damage to Nigerian society. Corruption, to a large extent, constitutes a detrimental force that hinders the practice of true democracy. This paper identifies a problem the pandemic status of corruption in Nigeria and considers it a major causal factor for the ravaging poverty and misery of a large segment of the citizens. The paper discusses the issue of corruption and suggests means of combating it. It however concludes with emphases on the need for genuine and practical implementation of the suggested measures as against the used-to-be imaginary ideal combating campaigns.

KEYWORDS:

PANDEMIC STATUS, CORRUPTION, NIGERIA, social problem, democracy, poverty.



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Introduction

Corruption is not a new phenomenon in every human society and as such, it is a global issue. Corruption is practiced in all sectors be it private or public. International organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) suffer from this disease, 'corruption' (Mnguni, 2003). It is evident that corruption cut across political system, religious denominations, affects the young and the old, as well as men and women. Corruption is found in democratic and dictatorial politics, feudal, capitalist and socialist economies. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim religions are all bedevilled by corruption.

More so, it is worth noting that the history of corruption is as old as the earth itself. Corruption and its far reaching consequences is as old as the Biblical Zacchaeus, a tax collector who enriched himself at the expense of his neighbours by misusing his power (Luke 19:1-10). Also were the sons of Eli who used their priesthood for personal benefit (1Sam: 2:12- 17).

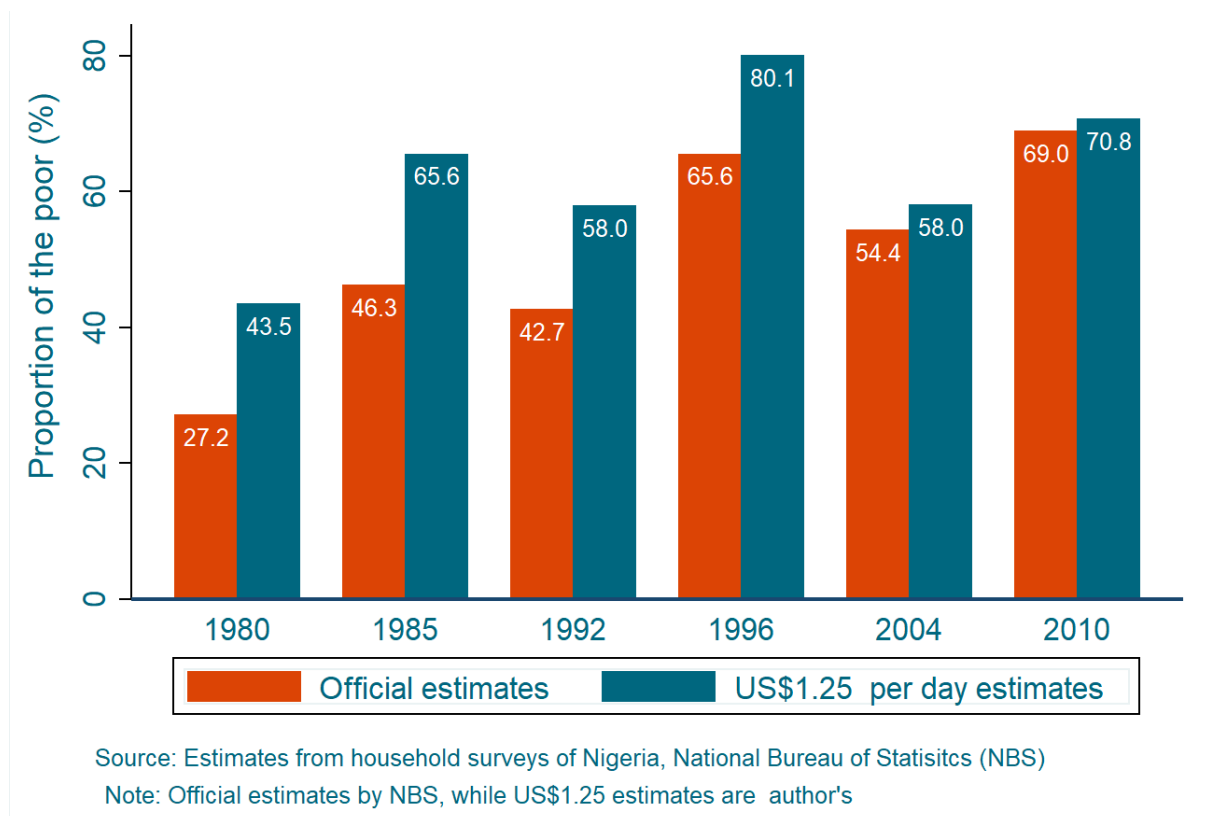
Considering the long history of corruption in human society therefore, we could literally conclude that corruption is part of human nature. However, taking corruption as such would be quite an unfair conclusion to many millions of decent people who do not indulge in such anti-social behaviours. It is usually taken that corruption is a crime of minority with power and who are privileged to hold high positions. But in the real sense, corruption in Nigeria is not restricted to any particular set or category of people. The main distinction deduced is the fact of the act of corruption been perpetrated more and on a larger scale by Nigerian leaders in various ranks and the multiplying effects on majority members of the society, and the society as an entity. The deplorable state of the Nigerian society reveals how much corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the social system.

The Nigeria State at almost six decades of independence but very unfortunate has hobbled from one cycle of crisis to another, essentially noted as by-product of the most dreaded and hydra headed virus called corruption perpetrated by succeeding generation of leaders that have swayed since independence. Nigeria no doubt as a personal opinion, can be described to have beaten the biblical record of the prolonged stay of the Israelites in the wilderness. While it took the Israelites forty years to make a journey originally meant for forty days to get to the promised land, Nigeria has been wandering in the wilderness for close to sixty years, and with to 'promised land' in sight at all. And critically looking at the direction Nigeria is going from the economic and political facets, it is evident the 'pharaohs' of the nation are still desperately dragging Nigeria back to bondage.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that the foundation of any structure to a great extent will determine the strength of the edifice erected on it. One could rationally deduce that five decades should be sufficient for laying the foundation for a nation's prosperity but in Nigeria's case, it merely serves as a tragic reminder of the aborted dreams and the missed opportunities of an era (Omotunde, 2010).

Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that Nigeria is a country abundantly endowed with human and natural resources but which are not utilised for the benefit of its majority citizenry because of corrupt practices. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2010), 60.9% of Nigerians in 2010 were living in 'absolute poverty'. Official figures also show that the poverty rate in Nigeria between 1980 and 2010 rose by 153.6% which implies the equivalent number of poor people rose from 39.2 million to 112.47 million. This is despite a rise in the country's GDP per capita by roughly 19% (www.cgdev.org).

Poverty rate in Nigeria %, 1980–2010



More so, the problem of corruption in Nigeria is internationally acknowledged as Nigeria is noted to possess the dubious honour as one of the world's most corrupt societies. In 2019, Nigeria scored 26/100, and was ranked 146 out of 180 countries and territories of the world (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2019). As a matter of fact, corruption in Nigeria is like a cancer that needs to be cured and as a matter of urgency. At the same time, it should be noted that corruption is dynamic and has various cross cutting dimensions and so the most appropriate approach to curb it must also be dynamic, open, integrated and holistic...(Global Programme Against Corruption conference, 2001).

This paper attempts to provide some explanations on the concept of corruption in Nigeria, explores its origin, causes, and consequences and more importantly, suggests measures that are likely to help in combating corruption in Nigerian society.

Conceptualizing Corruption

Corruption like most social science concepts has no single universal definition. Its specific definition and application vary and perhaps the only agreement among scholars is that corruption is a difficult concept to define and which has contributed to the difficulty in successfully prosecuting corruption cases (Soyombo, 2006).

This paper however acknowledges Odekunle's attempt to conceptualise corruption as he used various illustrations as *"asking, giving or taking a fee, gift or favour in exchange for the performance of legitimate task; the pervasion or obstruction of the performance of such a task or the performance of an illegitimate task; hoarding, collusive price-fixing, smuggling, transfer-pricing, inflation of prices, election rigging, illegal arrests for harassment or intimidation purposes, abuse/misuse/non-use of office, position or power, dumping of obsolete machinery or outdated drugs, illegal foreign exchange transactions, legal but...unfair and unjust acquisition of wealth, 'gilded crimes', certificate forgery,*

false accounting and claims, diversion of public, corporate or other person's money or property to direct or indirect personal use, etc. (Odekunle, 1982).

Theoretical Orientations

Better understanding of the social world no doubt requires theories because theories present phenomena from different perspectives in order to have broader understanding. Theories are set of ideas formulated for the purpose of explaining how something works. Sociological theories are set of ideas which try to explain how the society or its aspects work (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000).

For the purpose of this reflection, two basic theories (Idealistic and Functionalist) are considered to further provide explanations on the concept of corruption.

The Idealistic theory

This theory is based on the assumption that it is people's ideas which determine their way of life and the organisation of their society. The approach conceives corruption in terms of the nature of social and moral values prevailing in the society. The Idealistic school is further divided into two: traditionalist idealist school and modernist idealist school.

Traditionalist Idealist school sees the major cause of corruption to be the blind importation and adaptation of western individualistic social values and attributes. And in suggesting solutions to the problem of corruption, this school of thought posits that inculcating in Nigerians a new mode of thinking anchored on our abandoned traditional values of respect for elders, devotion to community service, the spirit of brotherliness, communal land ownership as opposed to the western individualistic craving for profit and material wealth will go a long way in helping to combat incidence of corruption in Nigerian society.

Modernist Idealist school on the other hand presents corruption as something embedded in the institutional and attitudinal remnants of our traditional society. In other words, this school sees corruption tendencies in Nigeria as being derived from certain traditional obligations such as our traditional gift-giving, traditional obligation of brotherhood and caring for our less privileged relations, strong kinship ties, and loyalty to kinsmen, ethnic groups and lineages. Such traditional obligations are believed to create a conflict of values and loyalty for a public servant who is expected to choose between formal bureaucratic values of public office and traditional values of kinship obligations. Such clash places the public officer in a difficult position and he is often likely to succumb to his strong traditional consideration.

The solution to combat corruption as suggested by the modernist school is the replacement of the vestiges of traditional social values with bureaucratic rationalism. This kind of reorganization and reforms will be affected by a nucleus of puritans of strong leaders, who will effectively monitor and ensure that public officers adhere strictly to the public code of conduct (Nkom, 1982).

The functionalist theory

This approach is based on the premise that the laxity of the social system in ensuring that all members of the society have equal access to institutionalised means in achieving the prescribed acceptable goals is the root of incidence of corruption. Robert Merton, one of the proponents of this school of thought posit that incidence of deviant behaviour is as a result of a social structure which exerts inevitable pressure on certain members of the society to engage in deviant behaviour like corruption. He noted that deviance results not from pathological personalities but from the structure and culture of the society. Members of the society are seen not to have equal opportunities of realising the shared

societal goals because of the inequality which bring about classes in the society. These differential opportunities further worsen the chances of the less privileged as the society places undue emphasis on the societal goals without corresponding strong emphasis on the means of attaining such goals. Merton noted that this result in a situation he called ‘anomie’ or ‘normlessness’. Members of the society tend to look for alternative means of achieving the prescribed culturally defined goals since the institutionalised means is not opened to everyone.

This sociological perspective in application to the Nigeria situation, reveal to us the fact of crave for wealth and general success as societal goal without corresponding ensuring that all Nigerians have equal access to legitimate means of acquiring wealth and success. The inevitable outcome of such unbalanced emphasis on goals and means of achieving such goals are all manners of corrupt practices as experienced in the contemporary Nigerian society. To combat the problem of corruption therefore, members of the society should to a great extent have equal access to institutionalised means like qualitative education and worthwhile job opportunity to acquire prescribed culturally defined goals like wealth and success.

Origin of Corruption in Nigeria

The phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria is as old as the society itself and as such sort of become part of the culture of the society. In understanding the roots of corruption in Nigeria, there is the need to access the history of Nigerian state. The pre-colonial Nigerian society was made up of many clans and kingdoms with diverse indigenous social and political structures. One fundamental aspect of the society was the adherence to traditional values especially that of ethnic solidarity and kingship obligations. Pressures were usually on holders of posts to put at heart the interest of their clan and family members, relatives and other kinsmen to gain access to job opportunity, scholarship and other opportunities. This was usually based on the traditionally acceptable notion that God help those who help their kinsmen and this act invariably bred the corrupt act of Nepotism. Also, bribery or accepting a gift in return of a favour received was regarded as a kind of cultural obligation and traditional value of reciprocity (Briggs & Bolanta, 1992).

Nigerian societies existed as such until the first Europeans made their way to West Africa beginning with Ruy de Sequiers in 1472. However, modern Nigerian history began in 1861 when the British took over the port of Lagos thereby establishing legitimate trade. This was followed by the British claim of the Southern Nigeria subsequent to the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885. By the year 1914, disputes concerning the Northern region were finally resolved and the British asserted control over the entire nation via colonial rule. To a large extent, the magnifying problem of corruption in Nigeria could be traced to the colonial rule which did very little to bring about development as it proclaimed. Colonial rule was full of exploitation and which was furthered by divide and rule. The members of the nation’s elites however rejected the 1947 drafted constitution by the colonialists because it was said not to reflect the interests of the Nigerian people. The 1954 drafted constitution which divided Nigeria into three regions- Eastern, Western and Northern was also rejected. This resulted into series of social problems with ethnic, regional and religious undertones. Politics from the first Republic till date were characterised by widespread corruption, largely focusing on nepotism based on ethnicity, region and religion. Thus, roots of current corruption in Nigeria extend back decades, finding a home in every regime in the country’s modern history (Goodling, 2003).

Causes of Corruption

One of the noted causes of corruption in Nigeria is pervasion of societal values and moral order. Nigeria over the years has become a society where there are no regards for traditional values of

honesty, obedience and dedication to duty. Also is the issue of greed which makes most Nigerians have the tendency to possess what does not belong them at all cost. Lack of social security is another cause of corruption in Nigeria where by there are no tangible social security scheme for public officers. Nigeria public service for instance is where many employees are always afraid of what will happen to them when they retire or are retired. This uncertainty makes many public servants crave to accumulate wealth by any means and so utilising public funds for private use.

Furthermore, unemployment is another noted cause of corruption in Nigeria. It's quite saddening to note that unemployment rate in Nigeria is alarming as many able and willing to work citizens can not get job to do. This situation has the tendency of breeding frustration among teeming unemployed population thereby making such category of people indulge in any kind of corrupt practices so as to survive.

Other noted causes of corruption in Nigeria are illiteracy and poverty. A large portion of the Nigerian population does not have access to basic education and qualitative education and so cannot get good jobs to do thereby making them to be poor. By this condition they are technically surcharged in terms of making worthwhile livelihood. There is thus great tendency for this unprivileged class to engage in any form of corrupt practices so as to make ends meet.

Effects of Corruption

Corruption is a crime that poses a great threat to socio-economic development as well as political stability to the Nigerian society. It is a phenomenon that has adverse effects on every segment of the Nigerian society and has destroyed the Nigerian society economically, politically and socially. Corruption in Nigeria has led to poverty, sickness, low life expectancy and unequal distribution of income and wealth. It has led to political instability and frequent changes in government epitomised by coups. It has been observed that corruption is the obstacle to proper execution of various government policies in Nigeria (Gould, 1983).

At the economic sector, corruption has brought about economic underdevelopment as greater part of the huge foreign earnings from the sale of the crude oil are lost into the pockets of the few opportunists we regard as our leaders. This has also led to the present backward state in technological advancement and thereby making Nigeria to be rated among the poor nations of the world despite being tremendously endowed with both natural and human resources.

Also, corruption has had negative effect on national development in the area of job placement, an integral part of the economic sector. Job placement in Nigeria most times depends on kinship, who you know, 'connection' as it is usually called and the ability to offer gratification. All these no doubt constitute corrupt practices.

More so, corruption exacerbates poverty and disproportionately affects those of lower incomes because it pulls resources from the national treasuries; placing the money into the bank account of a few individuals who are politically powerful (Goodling, 2003).

Corruption contributes greatly to political instability and often times leads to pervasive cynicism about politics and politicians. The scenarios of the past elections in Nigeria bear witness to how bad our political institution has been bastardised by corruption. Elections were widely rigged in conjunction with the commission in charge of conducting election and it would not be until after one to three years before such cases are sorted by the judiciary. The different cases of scandals that have rocked and still rocking the legislative arm of the government are pure evidences of perpetration of corruption with few revealed and many swept under carpet.

Furthermore, corruption has brought about decay of our social infrastructure and amenities. Public utilities are neglected with money meant for provision and maintenance usually developing wings and flying away. And the notion of government property not anybody's property as well as the notion of partaking in the national cake perpetuate corruption in the Nigeria society.

Attempts at Fighting Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption becomes a very major issue that has continued to live with Nigerian society despite various legal provisions clearly spelt out to take charge of issues relating to corrupt practices especially with the government sectors (as in the criminal code of the federation and the civil service regulations). We could thus see that our problem in Nigeria is not that of lack of laws but actually the problem is that of ineffective law enforcement.

Over years, government have always shown concern on tackling the problem of corruption adopting different strategies and mechanisms but the fact of lack of sincerity, lack of will and progressive continuity on the part of government would not make such efforts yield as expected. Attempts at combating corruption could be dated back to the 1st Republic with the act of seizure of property and money believed to have been acquired illegally by public officials. Efforts were also seen even by the military regime as in the case of Assets Investigation Panel set up by General Murtala Muhammed to look into the allegation of corrupt practices within the public officers as well as the military governors.

More so was the introduction of WAI, war against indiscipline by the Generals Buhari and Idiagbon regime which was a remarkable effort at fighting corruption where Tribunals were set up to try governors and public officers alleged of corruption practices and those found guilty were sentenced to various jail terms, some made to return looted fund and illegally acquired property. The Babangida regime though introduced Mass Mobilisation for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) as a pet project to deal with the problem of corruption, but in the real sense, this regime experienced very high incidences of corrupt practices in all facets of the society. His successor, General Abacha was however not better as several billions in foreign currency were looted and siphoned to foreign banks which part were later recovered. President Obasanjo on assumption the status of the number citizen in 1999 did not waste time in making his intention to fight corruption known as the Anti corruption Bill was passed and corruption fighting organs like Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) were established (Soyombo, 2006).

Furthermore, the administration of President Umaru Ya'radua showed commitment in the fight against corruption as the established corruption fighting organs were sustained and several cases of trial of public office holders were experienced. The current dispensation of President Goodluck Jonathan is also seen to maintain these organs and they have been handling different corrupt and related cases.

Meanwhile, it is observed that despite several attempts to fight corruption through the various Anti corruption campaigns in Nigeria, our society is still faced with the problem of corruption in all facets of its system. It is thus worth to note some of the identified impediments of these campaigns.

Impediments to the Anti-corruption Crusades

One and the major of the impediments to the anti-corruption crusades is the lack of political will by the government itself to combat corruption. Poor attitude of government and its law enforcement agencies is observed and this to an extent stands as great impediment to the anti corruption crusade.

Corrupt cases are usually under reported and over years, government and the law enforcement agencies have not demonstrated sufficient commitment to the fighting of corruption. Court injunctions and adjournments are specific ways of use of judicial process to delay justice in Nigeria.

Institutional weakness is another major impediment to the anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. This is seen in the areas of limited technological resources and inadequate facilities and resources to fight corruption. There is usually difficulty in prosecution and conviction because documented evidences, reliable data and information are rarely available.

More so, corruption is seen more to be white collar crime, crime against the state rather than individuals or identifiable groups. Hence in most cases, nobody feels sufficiently aggrieved personally as to ensure a serious prosecution. This position is justified by Sutherland (1961) as he noted that crimes in the street i.e traditional crimes like theft, burglary, murder, robbery e.t.c attract more attention and publicity than crimes in the suites like corruption and which are usually more costly.

Other impediments to anti-corruption crusade include high level of unemployment, poor social services, pervasive poverty, greed, inadequate control of individual behaviour, group influence and the desire to live up to societal expectations.

Suggested Measures for Fighting Corruption in Nigeria

- i.** Corruption should be defined in clear terms so as to identify the phenomenon for investigation purposes. Subsequently, laws should be appropriately amended and applied without delay and clear checks and balances mechanism in the law enforcement system should be instituted by making independent law enforcement agencies really independent from government manipulations
- ii.** Punishment meted out to corrupt persons should be sufficiently high to serve deterrent factor. This is with the back drop to the justification for punishment in the classical theory of crime which presumes that individuals including criminals are rational animals who act out of free will, with the assumption that the benefit they will derive from corruption for instance, will exceed the pains they will bear from it. The only way therefore to deter such people is to make corruption unprofitable by inflicting punishment in excess of their gains.
- iii.** Bureaucratic reforms should be instituted to check the activities of government in order to reduce opportunities for corruption
- iv.** Leadership by example must be exhibited and so emphasis should be on transparency, accountability and good governance in all government activities.
- v.** Reduction of poverty by creation and redistribution of wealth through provision of employment opportunities will go a long way in helping to fight corruption.
- vi.** Employed citizens should enjoy justifiable and reasonable salaries to encourage efficiency and diligence. Workers should also be guaranteed a worthwhile life after retirement. Programmes like the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) should be judiciously implemented and easy to access by all that deserve it. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that pension and gratuity are promptly paid
- vii.** Partnership and cooperation with international agencies should be encouraged to facilitate freezing and retrieval of stolen public fund kept in foreign accounts as well as in the prompt prosecution of corrupt individuals
- viii.** Financial institutions should be empowered to make public and constantly, the details of accounts of public officers and as demanded by any other institution.
- ix.** Public opinion is a very important factor for the control of corruption and so every member of the society should enjoy the privilege of hearing their views on corrupt issues

- x. Remuneration for political office holders should be such which would be unattractive to discourage those people that are not committed to serving the nation.

Concluding Remarks

The reflection provides explanations on the incidence of corrupt practices in the Nigerian society and as well noted some of the accompanying effects on the society. The main objective of the paper however is the call for genuine and appropriate implementation of the suggested measures which to a great extent would pave way for successful fight against corruption in the Nigerian society.

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