

POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The rate of political corruption in Nigeria is progressively increasing with an upsurge in the number of cases where apparatus of government has become an instrument for the enrichment of members of political elites. From pre-independence era to date, political corruption and its attendant problems in forms of vote buying, election rigging and manipulation, outright embezzlement by politicians have negatively affected the lives of Nigerians. This has led to increased political apathy and distrust in the country's fledgling democratic ideals. In view of the foregoing, the paper examines the extent of political corruption in Nigeria, with its implications on poverty reduction. Poverty Eradication Programme has not achieved desired results due to endemic political corruption. Therefore, to reduce poverty, immunities of politicians should be removed, law courts should be strengthened to adjudicate without fear and favour and public annual declaration of assets of political office holders should be made compulsory.

INTRODUCTION

Political corruption in Nigeria has become an issue of major political and economic significance and the necessity to take measures against it has become evident. This vexed issue, which is now a widespread phenomenon in the country, is regarded by analysts of the Third World as the single most important obstacle to economic development and political integration (Tignor, 1993).

Manifestation and reality of political corruption are not new in Nigeria's political terrain. It has been in existence even before the country gained independence. Actually, the social ill gained prominence during the creating of modern public administration in the country. This was the first time when the country witnessed reported cases of official misuse of resources for personal enrichment (Storey, 1952). It is on record that Britain became increasingly concerned after World War II about Nigeria's readiness for independence, and used their worry about political corruption to argue that transfer of power ought to be slowed down. Also, in the late colonial Nigeria, a considerable amount of bribery, nepotism and the use of political office for personal enrichment did exist (Tignor, 1993, Oshunokun, 2002).

Foremost politicians such as Nnamdi Azikiwe in the East, Adegoke Adielabu in the West and some native authority officials in the North were among the politicians investigated for questionable practices before the dawn of First Republic in Nigeria (Tignor, 1993). The death of General Sani Abacha (Former Head of State in Nigeria) was one of the events that brought to public glare the extent to which public office holders have gone in using money meant for the public for their personal needs. The Observer (a UK based Newspaper) of June 20, 2004 wrote that French investigations of bribes paid to government officials to ease the award of a gas plant construction in Nigeria revealed the global level of official graft in the country. The investigations led to the freezing of Abacha's various accounts containing about 100 million United States Dollars (Chamberlain, 2002, Ocheje, 2002). However, this lump sum of money is yet to reflect on the socio-economic conditions of the poor in Nigeria.

Almost all the past regimes in Nigeria since independence have received various accusations on how the ruling class has gradually impoverished the Nigerian masses through political corruption. This is evident in frequent regime changes which had occurred in Nigeria in the last four decades, which have also been accompanied by charges of gross administrative malfeasance and promises to introduce honest government. It is obvious, that, the political system in the country has not witnessed any remarkable change since the time of independence to date because the same set of politicians and military administrators of old are still parading themselves in the corridor of power. Therefore, the successive government in Nigeria is characterized by political elites, who facilitate regime change with inordinate ambitions (Oshunokun, 2002). Against this background the paper is aimed at examining how political corruption has been influencing poverty in Nigeria.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

The difficulty of defining political corruption has occupied scholars for decades. Hodess (2004) in his essay on corruption defines it as "the abuse of entrusted power by political leaders for private gain with the objective of increasing power or wealth". Political corruption involves a wide range of crimes and illicit acts committed by political leaders before, during and after leaving office. These are wrongful acts of public officials who are supposed to be trustees of the commonwealth, but have turned themselves to political buccaners and thereby seeking power (political) for their own private gains. Political corruption occurs when political gladiators exploit the instrument of state power to promote their personal agenda (Sklar et al 2006). This is a situation when political leadership becomes parochial with overriding consideration for personal survival rather than national development. It is also an abuse of public office for private gains which include fraud, bribery, fixing of public money in private accounts, outright embezzlement, presentation of forged cheques,

granting unauthorized loans, misappropriation, posting of fictitious credits, fraudulent transfers, land withdrawals, shallow foreign exchange deal, and other dirty deals (Ojerunde, 2003; Omolayo, 2005).

Alternatively, it is regarded as "unsanctioned or unscheduled use of public resources for private ends". It might take the form of 'misperformance' or neglect of a recognized duty, or the unwarranted exercise of power, with the motive of gaining some advantage more or less directly personal. Political corruption arises when there is collaboration between politicians and state agents, who because of their virtue of office are entitled to make and enforce laws in the name of the people, are themselves corrupt. In other words, political corruption surfaces whenever political decision-makers use their political power to sustain their power, status and wealth.

Mainly because political corruption takes place at the highest levels of the political system, it can be distinguished from administrative or bureaucratic corruption. Bureaucratic corruption takes place at the implementation end of politics while political corruption takes place at the formulation end of the politics, where decision on the distribution of the nation's wealth and the rules of the game are made. This form of corruption is often perceived to be a special characteristic of government in developing countries and that it probably constitutes one of the three or four most harmful problems facing Third World government (Becker, 1991; Amundsen, 1997). It is important here to point out that, political corruption is regarded by many as an obstacle to transparency in public life. This widespread phenomenon affects everybody, the damage that can be inflicted by politicians or parties acting out of greed, or in the service of those who bankrolled their ascent to power, is immense. Therefore, it is not surprising that people the world over are demanding absolute probity of their political leaders.

From the pre-independence era till now, political corruption has assumed a two-way dimension. The first dimension has to do with politicians/ruling elites who abusing their offices to extract and accumulate resources. This happens when political-power-holders enrich themselves, individually and collectively through bribes, embezzlement, fraud, privatization, land and oil blocs' allocation, public contracting and preferences that benefit the business interests of officeholders even when they are legal or made relatively legal.

In Nigeria, preferences and favour are given to businesses in which public office holders have direct ownership. This they do in order to build their private businesses and enterprises while in power. The Vanguard Newspaper of September, 4th, 2005 in its comments on the frosty relationship between the president and his deputy readily brings to mind an instance out of many when, President Olusegun Obasanjo and his Vice had bantered words with one another over allegation of giving under

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favour/preferential treatment to benefit their personal businesses or to some of their allies even at the detriment of generality of Nigerians.

The other common dimension of political corruption in the country is that of power maintenance of the incumbents. This occurs when political power is used in buying political support through favouritism, clientelism, co-optation, patronage politics and vote buying. State resources that are made available to office holder for public purposes are used for party campaigning and electioneering in an unconstitutional way. Agbese (1992) observed that in post-independence Nigeria, all political coalitions and groups have been engaged in determined efforts to capture the apparatus of the state in order to use the state's redistributive powers to amass wealth. Soon after capturing the government, the incumbent regime usually erects significant barriers to entry and monopolizes the supply of legislation, thus making certain that the other groups do not participate in the allocation of resources.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Political corruption in Nigeria could be explained within the theoretical framework of Anomie theory. Anomie is a theory closely associated with two theorists, Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton. However, this study therefore, embraces Robert Merton's paradigm of social structure and anomie as a valuable analytical framework for the explanation of political corruption and poverty in Nigeria because it contains a classic sociological analysis of individual adaptations to cultural contradictions.

Anomie refers to the lack or ineffectiveness of normative regulation in society. Merton pointing out contradictions in American culture in his work in 1957 argued that a society in which there is an exceptionally strong emphasis on specific goals (money, wealth) without a corresponding institutional means, will lead to a situation of anomie. According to Merton, American culture prescribes money as the primary goal, prescribes work as the appropriate means of achieving this goal, and proscribes crime as an inappropriate means. He later in his theory of anomie offered a typology of adaptations based on the individual's acceptance or rejection of cultural goals and institutionalized means.

Adopting this theory to explain why public office holders engage in political corruption despite their lofty and enviable positions in the society and benefits attach to these positions, points to the place accorded wealth or money in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is overwhelming emphasis on being successful; people who engage in ostentatious living and flagrantly display of wealth are respected and idolized. Virtues like good name, integrity, hard work and diligence have all become the yardsticks of the past in determining who should be honoured and respected in the society (Ademilekun, 1990). On the other hand, as political corruption gives scandalous wealth to the ruling class the mass of Nigerians witness growing poverty, misery and degradation (Osoba, 1996).

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION ON POVERTY

In recent times, the world has witnessed a renewed interest of researchers, academics, and policy makers in scrutinizing the link between political corruption and poverty (Mauro, 1997). A substantial number of recent studies have examined existing relationship between corruption and poverty to ascertain various ways in which the phenomena interact. Without gainsaying, the issue of abuse of public office for private gain has now taken a central stage among researchers, especially at a time like this when corruption scandals have toppled governments in both major industrial and developing countries (Mauro, 1998).

Though, literature (against the popular belief that says that corruption and poverty are directly related in developing countries) points to the conclusion that corruption does not produce poverty, but with evidences and facts founded on practical experience and careful observation, maintains that corruption has direct effect on economic and governance factors which in turn produce poverty (Chetwynd et al, 2003). Butressing this, the World Bank's World Development Report 2000/2001 confirmed that political corruption manifests when political leaders fail to embark on provision of socially valuable goods, or divert public resources from infrastructure investments, and even increase public spending on capital-intensive investments that offer more opportunities for kickbacks etc. These and many others according to report exert debilitating consequences on the poor people (WDR, 2001).

Nigeria, the sixth largest producer of oil in the world and the leading producer in Africa in spite of her enormous wealth of human and material resources suffers from high levels of poverty and rising inequality (Ali-Akpajiak, 2003). Indeed, almost all social indicators used in conceptualizing and measuring poverty support this. Of all the factors given as why poverty persists in Nigeria, political corruption ranks the highest (APRM, 2005). The report also showed that political corruption can primarily explain poverty in Nigeria. Presenting a veritable case of corruption and political malaise in Nigeria in one of his papers, Ribadu (Former EFCC Boss) described periods between 1979 and 1998 as the darkest period in the history of corrupt regimes. He described the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari of 1979-1983 as the one that was characterized by wanton waste, disrespect for rule of law and free for all looting of public funds by public office holders (Ribadu, 2006).

A high level of political corruption in the Nigeria has engendered bad governance in the form of unaccountable and favouritist political decisions, manipulated, weak and distorted institutions; lack of transparency and accountability; immunity and impunity; and elections that are not free and fair. In the words of Walecki (2003), political corruption in Nigeria has led to a compromising of democratic ideals, growth of political apathy among voters and even mistrust of the authorities, as well as the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies in the country. Politicians have hijacked

democratic institutions in Nigeria by turning elected offices into vehicles for political corruption. Nigeria with abundant human and natural resources has got only poverty to show for her abundance because of pronounced political corruption of its leaders. (Dazema, 2004).

Writing on consequences of political corruption, Mauro (1997) maintained that countries with high levels of corruption experience poor economic performance. In his view, political corruption also hinders domestic investment, discourage foreign investment, encourage overspending in government and distort the composition of government spending. In the same vein, Transparency International also confirmed that corruption is one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. It undermines good government, fundamentally distorts public policy, and leads to the misallocation of resources, harm the private sector and private sector development and particularly hurts the poor. Also, in 2003, Kofi Annan, a one time UN Secretary General described political corruption as evil that affects poor people the most. He also opined that political corruption feeds inequality and injustice, discourages foreign investment and aid, and also hinders growth. To him, it is a major obstacle to political stability, and to successful social and economic development.

In Nigeria, the daily life of poor people are affected in many ways and they become poorer because their rightful share of economic resources or life saving aid has been taken away from them as a result of 'eat all' attitudes of political office holders. By diverting scarce resources intended for development, political corruption makes it harder to meet fundamental needs such as those for food, health and education. Despite the determination of Obasanjo's administration through his Universal Basic Education Programme to make education universal and free, corruption and misuse of public fund remains one of the biggest hindrances to achieving this feat.

Apart from the above, political corruption also affects the poor in the area of political participation and choice making in the country. Many poor people in Nigeria have been made to vote against their wish during elections because they have been bribed by money-bags to do this. Many of them in order to keep body and soul together exchange their votes for money and some other material things. This problem is seen as obstacle to poverty reduction.

Many good poverty reduction programmes embarked on by different administration in the country have all failed to ameliorate the level of poverty of Nigerians. Due to high level of political corruption in the country, many resources that have been set aside to tackle poverty have been diverted into private accounts of many politicians. The part played by political corruption in denying many poor people access to infrastructural amenities in the country cannot be over-emphasized. In Nigeria,

allocation of resources toward projects that would be of immense benefit to masses is always distorted as a result of this institutionalized corruption. For instance, The Association of Seadogs (NAS) queries the late hour rush by the ex-President (Obasanjo) to sell off some assets that belong to the federal government literally days before he handed over to an in-coming administration. To them, beneficiaries of these transactions are cronies and acolytes of the President and that the ludicrously low prices at which these lucrative deals were concluded at the twilight of Obasanjo's administration are also pointer to that fact. A lot of grants and foreign aids that would have helped in alleviating some of the problems of poor people if judiciously utilized have been carefully set aside for personal use by those in power (www. Usaficaonline.com).

African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) team of experts after one-month assessment of developmental projects in Nigeria in March, 2008 corroborated the claim of former World Bank President, Mr. Paul Wolfowitz, that if \$300bn had been stolen by public officeholders in Nigeria in the last four decades had been used for public good, the country would have been an exemplary nation in Africa. They all attributed Nigeria's failure to develop to Political corruption.

In all, widespread political corruption in Nigeria has brought about feeding the wrongs and total denial of poor their human rights.

CONCLUSION

The act of using political power by office holders to manipulate political institutions of government and the rules of procedures so as to illegally enrich self has been on persist since the pre-colonial to the neocolonial regimes in Nigeria. This illicit act significantly increased during the second republic and has presently assumed a dimension that transcends imaginations of many Nigerians. Various past regimes in the country had made several policies to ameliorate this ugly trend but to no avail. This has been so because, most of these policies were politically motivated and as a result they could achieve nothing but political aims. If this trend should go unchecked, the country should expect a great upsurge in the scale of political corruption with corresponding increase in poverty. Addressing the problem and paving way for all round development in the country requires transparency and accountability (the hallmark of democratic system) into governance. Politicians should be made accountable through the representative system to the public at large by supplying the public with relevant information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding sustainable solutions to the problem of political corruption in developing countries has always been faced with stiff oppositions from political elites in these countries who regard politics as an arena for self-enrichment (Fukuyama 2005). In

Nigeria of today, despite efforts and policies of the government at various levels to reduce corruption of all forms, it is still a common thing to see how laws and regulations are systematically abused, side-stepped, ignored by the rulers, or even tailored to fit their interests. Various clean-up campaigns by successive administrations have been to help them stay in power, to discredit members of a previous regime, destroy the reputations of leaders of the opposition, and to improve support among the population for the incumbent regime.

In lieu of the above, it is glaring that the challenge of political corruption confronting the country strongly argues that a bolder approach and collective collaboration of Nigerians is needed in order to salvage the country from the claws of corrupt politicians/rulers. Political corruption is a phenomenon caused by a plurality of factors. Therefore, clean up programme requires a comprehensive approach that would facilitate lasting solution to this menace.

One of these clean up programmes is to remove the immunity clause in the 1999 constitution of Nigeria so that corrupt ruler can be brought to book and be penalized for any wrongful act committed while in office. In the administration of Obasanjo, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) could not try corrupt Governors and their deputies in the law courts because of the immunity clause in the 1999 constitution that exclude them from being made answerable to any offence when they are still in office. If corrupt leaders are being punished for their misconduct, this will serve as deterrence to others.

To reduce political corruption, accountability which is the hallmark of a democratic system must be strongly upheld. Politicians should be made accountable through the representative system to the public at large. This should involve supplying the public with relevant information on legal, political, administrative and financial issues.

Another important solution to the problem of political corruption is the issue of good governance and honest leadership. In order to foster this, there must be thorough checks and balances. Since a dominant executive tends to concentrate power, then, a counterweight can be the creation of independent agencies, the participation of civil society and other stakeholders in the democratic processes. Civil society organizations can help by raising awareness about corruption and also educate citizens about their rights and the proper responsibilities of their governments. They can also bolster political will by supporting and advising governments on anti-corruption reform, and monitoring government's actions.

Public and periodic disclosure of assets and incomes of candidates running for public offices before and after their tenure should be encouraged. Equally important is the raising the deterrence provided by the legal system by increasing the

probability of detection, apprehension and conviction and the penalties malfeasant behaviour.

It is noteworthy here to mention, that, the developed countries of the world also help in curbing political corruption in Nigeria by making effort to stop influx stolen money into their countries, return stolen money to the country of origin and give unflinching support to institutions fighting corruption.