

Ethics, Moral Values and Governance: A Reflection on Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria in most recent time has received barrage of criticism, scandalized and indeed bastardized by several personalities and members of the international community for gross misplacement of various ethical and moral values. The root of all these appears to be lack of value orientation and good moral judgment which seem to be inherent. Nigeria believed to be the largest gathering of black people, is by far the most bountifully endowed nation in the African continent. Yet this God endowed attributes are more often than not abused. Worthy of mentioning is the endemic corruption ravaging the whole arms (organs), tiers of government, institutions, individuals and cabals. This paper attempts to look into the Nigeria system of government and how corruption has eaten deep into the system and moral values thrown to the wind. The work concludes that for Nigeria to have a good standing among the comity of nations, morality should be the guiding principle, since any society that its government and people is corrupt, cannot be democratically responsive to its citizenry. It further, opines that, if government institutions are properly structured and strengthened they will help to fight and abate corruption in the system.

Keywords: Ethics, Moral Values, Governance, Corruption, Nigeria.

Introduction

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English (2006) Ethics is defined as a principle of right or good conduct, or a body of such principles. Right from the classical times and indeed, throughout the ages to modern times, philosophers and social thinkers have always pondered on the rightness and wrongness of human actions and what should constitute a morally and ethically accepted standard of behaviour. Although, there are some elements of vagueness in the use of the expression ethics/morality, the concept denotes goodness and evil. Ethics is important in all human life. In every profession there are certain expected behaviours or actions, therefore, when ethics is applied to a profession it simply refers to the

principle of rules of conduct of the action or behavioral disposition of members of that group. In professional ethics, such rules might not have legal authority to back them, but they are generally accepted standard of morality as it affects the discharge of their duties. Professional ethics are intended to act as a guide to check the conduct of members of a particular profession and ensure efficiency.

According to Bello (1995) in Aghulor (2010), professional ethics are both philosophical and sociological. They are philosophical when they are concerned with what is right or wrong in members when performing their professional duties, while they are sociological when they are concerned with the issues of occupational self-control in the discharge of their duties, with this opinion, it is apparent that ethics will indeed play an important role in the regulation of human conduct in Nigeria. Furthermore, Ottong(2007) cited in Ebaye, Etteng, and Wonah (2009) opined that “society is not static, yet it possesses the elements of continuity, persistence and of course perpetuity”. Society is dynamic and as such requires a sound moral ground to keep its continuity. Modo (1988) observed that “what makes social life possible is the existence of social order.... such that social order makes for consistency in social life and the persistence of the system”. However, it is equally observed that in spite of the existence of order in society; the society still seems to be in a state of constant flux because of its susceptibility to change. Generally, the process of change in a system is gradual and at times, so subtle that while it is obvious, it is not glaringly clear. If there are words that are very common on the lips of Nigerians today, there are corruption and fraud.

A good number of analysts in Nigeria see corruption and fraud as being inevitable. Their argument portrays that it is the natural desire in man to lead on one hand and to follow on the other hand. This is trying to explain and conjure the fact that the nature man is fragile. As to

whether you are to lead or follow is dependent on the use of one's manipulative instrument that has rather encouraged various forms of gratifications which has escalated into corruption and fraud and has today become a monster without respect for class. No wonder President Muhamadu Buhari during his 2015 presidential campaign repeatedly opined that, "if we did not kill corruption in Nigeria, corruption will kill us". In Nigeria, corruption and fraud has become a way of life as it has become firmly and systematically entrenched in the system. However, the institutionalization of corruption and fraud in the society did not mean acceptance of corruption as 'norm' but as behaviour that should be stoutly condemned. Corruption breeds inefficiency and encourages mediocrity. There are many cases of misfits in Nigeria arising from nepotism, discrimination and double standards. There are situations where standard are at times compromised and mediocrity extolled. It is posited that the concept of gratification, gifts, bribery, smuggling and corruption, might mean different things to different people and that is i may call *relativism in corruption*. Indeed, there may be cultural constraints in the interpretation of what amounts to corrupt practices. Corruption from whatever position one sees it is evil, dangerous and devastating and Nigerians should understand and indeed fight corruption to its logical end.

What is Corruption?

According to Sharma, Sadana and Harpreat(2012), in his work *Public Administration in Theory and Practice* defined Corruption as:

auniversal phenomenon that no society is free from it. For instance, many countries over the years particularly Italy has been suffering from nexus between politicians and underworld Mafia. In 1997 there were reports of several British parliamentarians having received money from clients for putting questions in parliament on their behalf. Even in the United States of America there is relatively widespread tolerance of petty corruption in American government.

Fredrickson tells us that the Reagan administration was the most corrupt administration in recent history. Abscam and the Lesser scams would seem to indicate that some members of (US) congress and of state legislatures were willing to take bribes. Recently, Japanese Prime minister had to give up his office because he was found involved in a big financial deal. In 1996, a former president and former prime minister in South Korea were awarded long term prison sentences for the shady deals during their regime.

The truth about corruption is that it is everywhere and it is nowhere, corruption is universal it can be found in any country, organization and institution. This is what I refer as the *universality of corruption*, this act cut across border, sea, ocean, race etc. In addition, Dike and Iwuamadi (2005) sees corruption as essentially a product of highly individualized and materialistic society which emphasizes struggle to acquire wealth and influence. Nweze (2002) further described corruption as the manipulation of the coercive potential of one's power position to gain personal or group advantage as some other people's or groups disadvantages. He equally opined that corruption is the deadly vampire haunting down democratic principles and human rights. Shihata cited in Okoli (2010, p.58) gave a comprehensive and encompassing definition of corruption as "the abuse of a public or private position in favour of the position holder, his family, friends or bribers and the selective or arbitrary application of rules to favour those who pay him". Additionally, Okoli(2010, p.58) defines corruption as "a moral question which the individual member of society, working on his own or in concert with other agents in society, answers to the detriment of his neighbour and society in breach of the golden rule of "do unto others as you would like them do unto you". Thus, corruption cut across all areas of human endeavour, the public and private sector, individuals and cabals. But by far, to have a comprehensive definition of corruption is a little difficult, the reason being that as alluded early corruption is universal and at the same time relative. Corruption is universal simply because it applies to all human races nevertheless; corruption is relative since it involves individual interpretation of corrupt situation. For instance, a man in bus was discussing how he stole monies belonging to an institution

through misappropriation and misapplication and at the same time praising himself for not rigging an election as an adhoc electoral offer. Hence, corruption is acting abnormal, not acting according to financial, economic, electoral, political, and even moral rules etc.

Features of Corruption

- 1) It is a deliberate or intentional exploitation of one's position, status or resources.
- 2) It may be done directly or indirectly.
- 3) It is done for personal aggrandizement, whether it is material gain, enhancement of power, prestige or influence.
- 4) It is done by violating legitimate or sanctioned or commonly accepted norms of behaviour
- 5) It is done against the interests of the community or other persons

However, Frederickson in his book *Ethics and Public Administration* cited in Sharma *et al* (2012) argued that attitudes toward corruption and ethical conduct appear to be situationally determined; it means that definition of corruption and what constitutes ethical behaviour vary depending on political or public administrator. For instance, those in public service have a greater interest in power and influence, whereas persons in business and commerce have stronger acquisitive interests, each will look at corruption from his respective angle. Hence definitions of corruption vary by profession, setting and culture and so do the standards of ethical behaviour.

Causes of Corruption in Nigeria

- a) Lack of proper education and training among civil servants.
- b) Low salaries and wages.
- c) Inadequate and inefficient supervision.
- d) Unnecessary political patronage of political officer holders.

- e) High level of poverty and poor orientation.
- f) Lack of good example from top public office holders.
- g) Lack of government political will to fight the vampire called corruption.
- h) Weak institutions to bring corrupt officials to book.
- i) The torturous and costly judicial or litigation procedure in the country.

Who is a Corrupt Person?

A corrupt person is a person who sold his honour for money and or any form of gift as gratification. It is equally a person who more often has a history of siding with the party that offers fat cash and gift, while keeping the reality aside.

Types of Corruption

a) Bribery: Bribery is the act of promising, giving, receiving or agreeing to receive money or some other item(s) of value with the corrupt aim of influencing a public official in the discharge of his official duties. Once money has been offered or promised in exchange for a corrupt act, the official involved need not actually accomplish that act for the offence of bribery to be complete. Terms like greasing palm, pay-offs, gratitude, kickback are used in local parlance to mean bribery. Bribery is a crime punishable as a felony.

b) Extortion: This is the unlawful or forceful extraction of money or property through intimidation and harassment. Extortion was originally the complement of bribery, since both crimes involve interference with or by public officials. Extortion may include threats of harm to a person or his property, threat to accuse a person of a crime or threats to reveal embarrassing information (blackmail).

c) **Organized crime:** Organized crime is a complex and highly centralized enterprises set up for the purpose of engaging in illegal activities. These kinds of organizations engage in offenses such as cargo theft, fraud, robbery, drug trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, and the demanding of protection payments. The principal source of income for these criminal syndicates is the supply of goods and services that are illegal but for which there is continued public demand such as drugs, prostitution, loan-sharking and gambling. Organized crime syndicate operates mostly through black markets. Encyclopedia Britannica ultimate reference suite (2014).

d) **Embezzlement:** Embezzlement according to Amundsen (1999) is thief of resources by people who are put to protect and administer it. It is when disloyal employees steal from their employers. This is a serious offence when public officials are misappropriating public resources in which he or she is employed and from resources he is supposed to administer on behalf of the public. However embezzlement is not seriously considered as corrupt act from a strict legal point of view but is included in the broader definitions.

e) **Fraud:** Fraud in law is a crime that involves the deliberate misrepresentation of fact for the purpose of depriving someone of a valuable possession. Although fraud is sometimes a crime in itself; more often it is an economic crime that has to do with trickery, swindle or deceit. For instance, it is fraud when politicians and state agents take a share for closing their eyes on economic crimes and it is a bigger fraud when they play an active role in carrying out the crime.

f) **Favoritism/Ethnicism:** This is a mechanism of power abuse which implies privatization and a highly biased distribution of state resources. It is very common in Nigeria simply because of the multiple ethnic gathering in the country; therefore politician tends to favour their ethnic origin more by giving most political appointment to persons from the same ethnic group thereby neglecting the principle of federal character. Secondly, the corrupt act of ethnicism breeds

tension in the system since attention is not paid to how these resources have been accumulated in the first place.

Political Corruption vis-à-vis Bureaucratic Corruption

According to Jens, Odd-Helge, Inge, Tone, Tina (2000), political or *grand* corruption takes place at the highest levels of political authority. It is when the politicians and political decision-makers (heads of state, ministers, top officials), who are entitled to formulate, establish and implement the laws in the name of the people, are themselves corrupt. With grand corruption we are dealing with highly placed individuals who exploit their positions to extract large bribes from national and transnational corporations, who appropriate significant pay-offs from contract scams, or who embezzle large sums of money from the public treasury into private (often overseas) bank accounts. Political corruption is when policy formulation and legislation are tailored to the benefit of politicians and legislators. Apparently, bureaucratic corruption is corruption as it occurs in public administration, mostly at the implementation end of politics. This “low level” or “street level” corruption is what citizens experience daily, in their encounter with public administrators and services providers like hospitals, schools, local licensing authorities, police, customs, taxing authorities, ministries and agencies etc. The sums involved are relatively modest and adjusted to local environment; thus bureaucratic corruption is frequently referred to as routine settlement.

The distinction between political and bureaucratic corruption is complex. This is simply because it relies heavily on the Weberian conceptual separation of politics from administration, which over the years has proved difficult to implement in most countries particularly the poor once and

hence is difficult to conform to. The distinction is nevertheless important in analytical terms. Political corruption is namely something *more* than a deviation from formal and written legal norms, from professional codes of ethics and court rulings. Political corruption is when rulers abuse laws and regulations, or set aside, ignore and tailor laws and regulations to benefit their private interests. It is when the legal bases, against which corrupt practices are usually assessed and judged, are weak and furthermore subject to downright encroachment by the rulers. In Nigeria, our leaders over the years have constantly abused, ignored and trampled on court judgements, thereby creating an environment saturated with political impunity.

In some cases, political corruption might take place on arenas without the general public noticing it in their daily life, or even knowing about it. Political corruption might be incidental, controlled or concealed, as in most countries with consolidated culture of liberal democracies. Likewise, bureaucratic corruption may take place at the implementation end of public administration without necessarily being a part of the political system or having political reciprocal action. This occurs particularly when a clean and strong government has been able to purify the corridors of power, and stop people from engaging in endless corrupt practices. At the same time, bureaucratic corruption and political corruption tends to go along a lot and to mutually understand each other. Political corruption is usually encouraged by endless bureaucratic process and corruption. Corruption in high places is highly infectious since it moves from the top echelon to the lower level officials (from vertical to horizontal) as these will pursue the predatory examples of, or even take instructions from their executive heads.

It then becomes pertinent that a holistic definition of corruption as a deviation from established rules, and a particular focus on bureaucratic corruption alone, can lead to misrepresentation of fact and realities. Widespread and systematic political corruption may be a basic mode of operation of certain government. Evidently, with the exception of a few examples of countries that has witnessed authoritarian regimes with a strict political and economic control (also on corruption) corruption is widespread in most countries that has refused to fully imbibe the culture of liberal democracy, such countries are popularly called neo-patrimonial, kleptocratic. Among these elites in Nigerian politics, corruption is one of the mechanisms through which the capitalist authoritarian power-holders enrich themselves. Bureaucratic corruption can be controlled and restricted when there is a leader who has political will and political ability to execute the necessary anti-corruption provisions in the constitution. History shows a number of successful controls on corruption in liberal democratic countries, where bureaucratic corruption is curbed through auditing, legislation and institutional strengthening. In most liberal democratic countries, political corruption is minimal in term of occurrence, and is handled within the existing political system; by reforming and strengthening the existing political, judicial and administrative institutions of checks and balances. In countries with systemic political and administrative corruption like Nigeria the established legal framework of the state is insufficient to comprehensively fight the menace the problem of corruption possess. Thus, the degrading effects of political corruption cannot be effectively handled by only legal or administrative approach, rather moral, normative, ethical, and indeed good political framework should be brought to bear. Therefore, the endemic nature of corruption in Nigeria calls for radical political reforms and building of strong, virile and independent anti-graft institutions.

Conclusion

Having come this far on the of this work, regrettably, it is important to note that corruption is all pervading, endemic and systemic in the world today and particularly in Nigeria, where our leaders both military and civilian have massively looted our common wealth. Corruption can come in form of mismanagement, fraud, white elephant projects, payment of huge sums of money to ghost workers, endless mobilization fees, ‘Ghana-must-go’ syndrome in legislative chambers and judiciary, outright stealing of public funds and government properties etc. Summarily, what Nigeria is passing through today with corruption cases and investigations in all sectors of the economy suggests that Nigeria needs a strong, vibrant and well-structured institutions to fight the impunity of corruption. Hence, for us to bring about total rebirth of the ethical and moral values in Nigeria, we do not need strong people/persons as leaders rather what the country need is strong and vibrant institutions that will be able to fight the menace of corruption irrespective of who is involved.

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