

CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF NIGERIA'S GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Corruption has been an albatross to Nigeria's democratic governance. Though the country has practiced democracy for 24 unbroken years now, the longest since its independence over six decades ago, democratic governance in Nigeria is fast being eroded by the pandemic of corruption. While it can be seen that democracy is working in the West, it is failing in Nigeria. Concerned observers have asked the question 'why is democracy failing in Nigeria?' There is a consensus among scholars and analysts at one common reason: corruption. Democracy -defined as popular rule- was designed to be populist in nature, with the people wielding enormous power to hire and fire who leads them every electoral cycle. However, corruption, with its cancerous spread across the Nigerian polity, has been a major setback to good governance in Africa's most populous nation. The purpose of this article is to examine how and to what extent corruption has been eroding democratic institutions in Nigeria. Two theories of corruption -Two Public and Prebendalism were applied to answer the questions of the study. This article, based on direct study and use of secondary data, examines the impact of corruption on democratic governance in Nigeria. The paper revealed that Nigerians have not tasted good governance that a working democracy like those in the West offer. Thus, Nigerians have suffered numbing frustration from the brunt of bad governance which has increasingly eroded confidence in the leadership. Thus, the argument that democracy guarantees good governance has been disproved in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper recommended, among others, ways to curb corruption to release to the people the dividends of democracy.

Keywords: corruption; democracy; governance; philosophy; Nigeria

Introduction

The prevalence of corruption in Nigeria is an albatross to good governance (Ebun 2014; Olayiwola 2013; Oyeshile 2010; Idakwoji 2010; Folarin, n.d.). The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in Section 5 (5) provides that 'the state shall abolish all forms of corrupt practices and abuse of power'. Though politicians have parroted eradication of corruption as a bait to voters and successive administrations have promised to wipe out corruption the monster is so alive and agile in the Nigerian society. In pursuit of this noble objective of the Constitution, laws have been put in place and institutions established to tame

corruption. This article delves into the philosophical implications of corruption on Nigeria's democratic governance, investigating how institutional reform and ethical considerations can mitigate the erosion of democratic principles.

Corruption remains the biggest problems facing most governments of the world today, especially the developing ones. It impedes the delivery of social good obtainable in a democracy, leading to erosion of democratic ideals. However, it is believed that good governance remains a mirage as long as it does not address corruption. This paper therefore examines the links between corruption and how it erodes democratic values and ideals in Nigeria as successive governments seem to be incapable of tackling the challenges posed by corruption in the country; to suggest ways of reducing corruption in order to strengthen democratic governance in the country.

Conceptual Consideration

Corruption

The word 'corruption' has its roots from Greek *corruptus* which means an aberration or a misnomer. This view is espoused in Khan's (in Alemika, 2004) definition of the concept as "behaviour which deviates from the formal rules of conduct governing the actions of someone in a position of public authority because of private-regarding motives such as wealth, power or status" which highlights the underlying motive and manifestations of the phenomenon to include abuse of office to reward favours or loot public funds. Commenting on corruption in Nigeria's governance, an associate professor of Business and Education at the Wayland Baptist University's USA, Nichodemus O. Ejimabo, echoed the views of other scholars that 'Years of plutocratic repressive dictators and military rule, coupled with widespread corruption, have resulted in large-scale neglect and deterioration of public services. The upsurge of corruption in Nigeria is endemic and troubling' (Ejimabo, 2013 p.11). Corruption is not peculiar to Nigeria alone, it has a global spread (Oluwagbemi-Jacob, 2011; Eneanya, 2020).

In Nigeria, corruption takes several forms but in the current article, we will restrict ourselves to view corruption as that generally characterized by looting of public funds and wealth kept secretly, i.e. capital flight; misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds; money laundering (acquiring money through fraudulent ways). Eradicating corruption in governance is one effective step towards entrenching democracy in Nigeria. However, a key missing link in Nigeria's fight against corruption is the low engagement of citizens in public

policy and governance process and this is because of citizens' diminished trust and eroded legitimacy of government (Eneanya 2020: 1, 7).

Nigerians identify as religious people. The corrupters and the corruptees are among the most religious in the world. What solutions have come from the religious perspective? This is the problem that formed the focus of the discussion in the paper by Udoh & Akpanika (2020) titled 'Christian Morality: A Panacea to Political Corruption in Nigeria' who recommended that Christian moral principles including love for people and servant leadership be adopted and taught in schools.

Democracy

Though commonly used in public discourse, the term 'democracy' is difficult to define. Rather, it is difficult to say what is *undemocratic*. This imprecision is partly due to the fact that democracy has levels. According to Hubber (in Alemika 2004: 12) democracy takes three popular forms - formal, participatory and social democracy. The formal or most elementary form of democracy has four traits: 'regular free and fair elections, universal suffrage, accountability of the state's administrative organs to the elected representatives, and effective guarantees for freedom of expression and association as protection against arbitrary state action' (Ibid: 12).

A political system can be referred to as participatory democracy, if it possesses the four traits of a formal democracy and it also ensures "high levels of participation without systematic differences across social categories (for example, class, ethnicity, gender)" (Ibid: 12). At the most advanced form, a social democracy is one that embodies the five traits of participatory democracy and delivers "increasing equality in social and economic outcomes" (Ibid: 12). From these three conceptions of democracy, it infers that 'democracy' means different things across different societies who practice it. The duties and obligations of leaders and the led in different democracies will also differ. Likewise, citizens' expectations of government. Nigerians, whose democracy is in the basic stage, will have a far lesser expectations from their government than, say, Americans whose democracy is most advanced.

Governance

Good governance is generally characterized by its attributes to promote the political and economic wellbeing of citizens. It entails the setting up of people-oriented, responsive government where human rights are protected and accountability and transparency are enthroned. Good governance is felt by its

manifestations in the economic and political terrain of a nation (Anazodo, *et al* 2015).

Other enemies of good governance are unemployment, poverty and insecurity (Akwaru 2013; Okafor 2011). The quality of governance in the Nigerian state is commonly described by the adjectives 'failed', 'lootocratic', 'kleptocratic', 'nepotistic', 'tribalistic' and so on. Though antithetical to the spirit of democratic governance, they capture the country's current reality.

Democracy, governance and corruption: what nexus?

'Corruption' according to Adagbabiri & Okolie (2018: 45), has reached a high crescendo such that an average Nigerian now possibly associates democracy with it.' This shows the depth and spread of corruption and the citizens' perception of it. As hinted at in the Greek origin of 'corruption', the idea did not originate in Africa. Likewise, corruption in Nigeria's governance. Scholars who have researched extensively on corruption in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole, trace corruption to the despotic colonial administrations (Isigwe 2012).

Shivji (1990) cited in Alemika (2004: 14) observes that the colonial governments in Africa were despotic. According to him: 'Its legal order was exactly the opposite of that prescribed by constitutionalism. Power was concentrated in the executive [...] while justice was dispensed by an administrator... The legislature, if one existed at all, was packed by the governor's appointees'. This aberration provided the template successor indigenous governments inherited. Shivji added that: 'The deeper structures of the colonial political and legal order were inherited or, in some cases, reorganized to reinforce despotism in the post-independence period' (ibid 15).

Military rule did not deviate much from the misnomer. The governance of Nigeria has been described as 'a hybrid regime with substantial limitations to the democratic process' (Glossklaub, 2015). Military rule, Frank and Ukpere (2012) explicated, has impacted much on Nigeria's democracy affecting all the arms of government. A recurring theme in the scholars' paper is that 'good governance is the only panacea against military intervention' (ibid, 286). They concluded their article by refuting the much-parroted claim that 'there is no ideal democracy anywhere' and pointed that 'there is no crime in getting it right. Why has Ghana gotten it right?' their views harmonize with the contention of this paper that Nigeria has the capacity to surmount its challenges and regain its favourable status as a regional leader in Africa.

The literature links corruption to diverse problems, namely loss of revenue; waste of public funds; unequal service delivery; deepening of political and economic inequalities; destruction of economic growth and erosion of rule of law (Adagbabiri & Okolie 2018: 47; Alemika 2004: 9-10; Ayobami 2011:4). For the present study, focus is on the potency of corruption to weaken democratic institutions and erode citizens' trust in their government. Unsurprisingly, corruption erodes trust in government because it creates a condition whereby public goods are accessible to only those with connection to officials -to use Nigeria's slang, 'who know who', 'long leg'- or money, or both. The manifestation of widespread corruption in government institutions has left the citizens disappointed. To echo Alemika (2004:11), 'diminished support for democracy' as well as diminished opposition to undemocratic support for alternative forms of government. This point is confirmed by the June 2023 military coup in Niger Republic. At the overthrow of the democratically elected government by the military on grounds of high levels of corruption in the country, the people littered the street to show solidarity for the military. Corruption breeds discontent with the performance of government.

Theoretical framework of analysis

The problem of corruption in Nigeria's governance has been extensively studied. A commonly recurring name in the literature on the subject matter is Ekeh (1975). In his paper 'Colonialism, and the Two Publics' he proposed the theory of Two Public wherein he identified a dichotomy between two public realms: the primordial and the civic public. The primordial consists of ethnic or religious groups while the civic public refers to the public realm of official bureaucracy. The citizens' only expectation is the granting of rights (benefits) by the state. In turn, they owe obligations to the state. In the Two Public, the civic public realm is amoral and feeding fat on the civic system is not seen problematic or corruption.

What can one expect from the Two Public? The actors cheat on the civic public to strengthen or enrich the primordial public. By so doing, corruption, nepotism, ethnicity and impunity are elevated to the status of statecraft. Continuing this argument elsewhere, Ekeh (in Alemika 2004) pointed that 'corruption gathers strength in Africa, and has expanded in scope, because it is widely accepted that the use of civic public office and funds for the benefit of one's primordial grouping is legitimate' (Alemika, p. 7).

Another theory which explains the politics of corruption and is viable for the present study is the prebendal theory popularized by Joseph (1987). Prebendalism

views corruption as the primitive acquisition of public resources at the detriment of a nation's socio-economic and political development. The theorist explicates corruption in Nigeria in terms of cronies or members of an ethnic group being compensated when one of their own comes to power and 'state officers are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by office holders who use them to generate materials for themselves and their constitutes and kinsmen' (ibid.). This identity politics has entrenched corruption to the extent that the award of contracts, political appointments are not based on merit but parochial considerations such as ethnicity, religion or patron-client relationships.

Examining Nigeria's democratic governance against the spirit or tenets of democracy

Nigeria's democratic governance, according to Allen and Ojatorotu (2009), seems to have failed in adequately meeting the aspirations of citizens' political and welfare needs. They, quoting other scholars, pointed that the rise of democracy towards the turn of the 21st century has been referred to as the 'second wave of independence' to highlight the strong link between democracy and good governance. The literature reveals that corruption in governance affects citizens' trust and confidence in their government.

Conclusion

Nigeria's political elite -with the exception of a minute few- the many years of democratic governance has evidenced, are experts only in winning elections and novices in the craft of governance. Little surprise a political can take as long as 20 years strategizing how to grab power and consolidate his grip on power yet remain clueless in resolving the nation's agelong problems.

While the past provides clues to solve present problems, we cannot be fixated on the past but make choices that confront us as individuals and as a nation. We wrap up this article paraphrasing the thoughts of afro-existentialist philosophers: 'what has happened to Nigerians is not as important as what they make of it. We must make the right choices and the right steps' (Onah *et al.* 2018). To control corruption in Nigeria drastic actions including strong political will and a corresponding support of the public must be galvanized. This can be achieved through institutional reforms.

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