

## **Democracy under the Shadow of Corruption in Nigeria: A Reflection on Some Issues and Way Forward**

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**Abstract:** Nigeria is one of the world's most endowed nations with abundant human and natural resources. There is practically every vital mineral deposits in all the states of the federation. Yet, it remains under-developed because of the menace of corruption. Corruption has become a way of life in Nigeria, which no one can ignore. Corruption and cronyism have long haunted Nigeria while military has been castigated for generally misruling the country. It must be noted that the military did not emerge from another planet. They are made up of people who come from various parts of the country and therefore are a reflection of the society. The first, second and third Republics failed essentially due to corruption from our political gladiators and the military insatiable appetite for greed and power. The effect of corruption on the nation's democratic process is myriad. Concerned about this, the study sets out to reflect on the nexus between corruption and democracy in Nigeria. The study concludes that corruption has been a stumbling block in the wheel of progress for democracy and that we can only advance if all and sundry is involved in the crusade to obliterate the menace.

**Key words:** Democracy, corruption, shadow, reflection

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### **INTRODUCTION**

May 29, 1999 marked a watershed in Nigeria's political annals. It was the dawn of the fourth Republic, a return to democratic rule after several years under the yoke of military misrule which was marked by much suffering, infrastructure decay and institutionalized corruption. The hope of the common man for a just and an egalitarian society became rekindled with the institution of a democratic government. However, the legacy of corruption and lack of accountability bequeathed by many years of military rule continues to be an impediment to the goals of socio-economic development (Akanbi, 2004).

It has been observed the world over that undemocratic governments, by the very fact that their powers do not derive from the people, provide a fertile breeding ground for corruption since the hallmark of such administration is lack of transparency and accountability. Corruption in turn engenders mismanagement of resources, which results in under development, poverty and chaos in the polity. Democracy, on the hand provides an institution of government that is both responsive and responsible to the people. A government that derives its legitimacy from the popular vote is reputed to conduct its affairs on

the platform of transparency and accountability, it is through this that corruption can be managed and the activities of a government be made productive.

It is a known fact that corruption has been threatening the democratic foundation of Nigeria since the attainment of independence in 1960 till date. Different opinions, strategies, programmes, etc have been proffered and implemented by governmental and non-governmental organizations to curb or as well as to reduce it and all to no avail (Oladokun, 2007).

To consolidate a nation's democracy, it is said to be based on some essential factors, which the country must be able to achieve, anti-corruption inclusive as emphasized by Transparency international. But in the case of Nigeria, has it really been possible? During the regimes of military dictatorships and even after the swearing-in of President Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria was still ranked as one of the most corrupt countries.

Therefore, corruption has become the biggest challenge militating against Nigeria's democratization march, which has always shown its effects on Nigeria's past and present fragile and fledging democracy. It has in Nigeria assumed a notorious dimension and has become the "common cold" in the social ailments afflicting the state and development (Metiboba, 1999).

## CONCEPTUALIZING CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY

**Corruption:** Corruption is a worldwide phenomenon, which has been with all kinds of society throughout history as a global crime. It is a universal phenomenon, which presents itself in different colorations and dimensions depending on where it rears its ugly head. Because of its widespread in terms of its coverage the concept attracts different meanings from different people particularly the social scientists. Some of these definitions are self-limiting in what they cover as constituting corruption while others are encompassing. A definition of corruption that falls into the first category sees the phenomenon as any transaction which violates the duty of a public office holder with a partial motive of acquiring or amassing resources illegally for personal advancement and self gratification (Odekunle, 1986; Otite, 1986).

From the above, it is common to find people referring to corruption as the perversion of public affairs for private advantage. Therefore, corruption in this sense include bribery or the use of unauthorized rewards to influence people in position of authority either to act or refuse to act in ways that are beneficial to the private advantage of the giver and that of the receiver. It also includes misappropriation of public funds and resources for private gains. One conclusion that can be drawn from this self-limiting definition is that a public official is corrupt if he accepts money or money's worth for doing something, which he is under a duty or an obligation to do. Also, by this definition, it is corruption for a public official to accept payment of cash or kind not to do what he is supposed to do or to exercise a legitimate discretion for improper reasons (McMullan, 1996).

The self-limiting definition reviewed above may not be so appropriate in understanding the concept of corruption in line with the objective of this study. This is because the definition has limited the phenomenon of corruption to the public officials alone as if private individual in the civil society are corrupt free. In view of this therefore, there is a need to find at least a definition of corruption, which covers everybody in the society. That is, there is the need to work for a more encompassing definition.

A simple, uncomplicated and encompassing definition of corruption that is found to be useful in this paper is the one that sees the phenomenon as the acquisition of that which one (as a member of society not public official alone) is not entitled (Akinyemi, 2004). The phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria that has engulfed the nation takes different forms at different scales. This

explains why the various dailies in Nigeria are often replete with cases of illegal practices, which take different forms but commonly called corruption. One of the commonest types of corruption in Nigeria is classified as looted funds with wealth, which are kept secretly abroad. This usually involves billions of dollars of stolen money by both political and military leaders. Another classified form of corruption in Nigeria is the one commonly referred to as misappropriation of public funds. This includes embezzlement, swindling and looting of public treasury.

Therefore, corruption is a plague that is recognizable globally. Every nation and international organization is finding measures in tackling the menace because it undermines democracy, helped the wrong leaders get elected and distract societies from facing urgent problems.

**Democracy:** Democracy can be seen as a form of government. Aristotle defines in its purest as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. This form of democracy (i.e. pure or direct democracy) was obtainable in the ancient Greek city-state because of its relatively small size. The part of the function namely government of the people is easily understood, the purpose of all government is to exercise political control over the people. But the phrase 'by the people and for the people' may be misleading. There has been no state either in ancient or modern times, where all adult have taken part directly in government. Even during the golden age of Greece, all citizens could vote and take part in government, but the citizenship was limited to certain sections of the population. The expression 'government for the people' means that the selected and elected representatives are expected to govern in the interest of the people (Oladokun, 2007).

However, there is no government, which does not claim to do this. Nevertheless, history has shown many examples of governments, which claimed to be concerned with the well being of the people and yet acted either selfishly or in the interest of only a section of the people. Democracy as a way of life reflects the basis and objective of the system, which encourages the rights and liberties of individuals. Such rights as freedom of movement, of speech, of religion, or association etc. as expressed in modern liberal democracy.

The motive of democracy was supposed to be a government that ensures social, political and economic equality. However, if the practice of democracy is to be meaningful, it must be admitted that personal self-development is the moral goal of democracy and maximum popular participation is the chief means of achieving it.

### **THE NEXUS BETWEEN CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY**

Akanbi (2003) stated that it has been observed the world over that undemocratic governments, by the very fact, that their powers do not derive from the people, provide a fertile breeding ground for corruption since the hallmark of such administration is lack of transparency and accountability. Corruption in turn engenders mismanagement of resources, which results in under-development, poverty and chaos in the polity. In such despotic circumstances, the press is not free and therefore flagrant abuses of human rights become the order of the day.

Democracy on the other hand, offers the possible institution of a government that is both responsive and responsible to the people. A government that derives its legitimacy from the people is expected to conduct its affairs on the platform of transparency and accountability. It is through this fact that corruption can be curtailed and at the same time, the activities of government be translated into good governance.

The relationship between corruption and democracy is noticeable in government transparency that is becoming an increasingly important topic in both stable and new democracies and the task of measuring the level of corruption in public office, as the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) by Transparency international is becoming of great value. Most societies have a certain degree of corruption permissiveness, with some of them being on the average more likely to justify corrupt practices than others. Although, measuring corruption is a difficult task, an index of corruption permissiveness based on citizen responses to survey questions may reflect the extent to which corruption is justified in different societies. There are significant cross national and cross-regional variations in corruption permissiveness and attitudes towards corruption, which are strongly and negatively related to democratic attitude.

In newly democratic countries, corruption may be seen as part of the inherited practices from old authoritarian regime and government has the implicit and explicit tasks of fighting it. Furthermore, stable democratic institutions and corruption are expected to be negatively related, but at first, this relationship sounds as if it is solely the rule of law, part of a democratic society, which prevents corruption. What about support for democracy and corruption permissiveness as cultural traits? Evidence from the world values survey shows that these two variables are, in fact strongly and negatively related and that there is a great deal of cross-regional and cross-national variation in both.

Corruption permissiveness is negatively related to support for democracy and to interpersonal trust. If we take the two variables as indicators of a democratic political culture, there is some evidence that justifying acts of corruption is culturally undemocratic. Corruption and democracy seems antagonistic, not just for the fact that democratic institutions increase government transparency, but also because corruption permissiveness at the citizen level is negatively related to support for democracy. Nevertheless, support for democracy as such is not an indicator of how democratic a country is. It reflects the extent to which democratic rule is massively accepted. The acceptance of corrupt practice is culturally undemocratic. Democratic institutions are expected to diminish the possibilities of corruption in government, but there is an expected relation between a democratic political culture and corruption permissiveness as well (Akanbi, 2004).

### **DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA UNDER THE SHADOW OF CORRUPTION**

In virtually all the institutions of the Nigerian state, corruption rears its ugly head as the hallmark of official business. From awesome Abacha loot to other Abdulsalam profligacy, from the Niger Dock scandal under Ozobia-led management to the controversy surrounding the removal of Auditor-General of the Federation, virtually all government agencies ranging from federal ministries to the National, State and even at the local government levels, have recorded one case of corruption or another.

Munlinge and Lsasetedi (1998) argued that to explain the entrenchment of corruption in modern societies, an excursion into history is necessary. Colonial rule policies of divide and rule and concentration of power discouraged accountability and accentuated the propensity for corrupt practices in Nigeria. These were the structures inherited at independence without any attempt made at fundamental restructuring. In the post-colonial era, power remained centralized and institution of the state continues to serve as tool for personal aggrandizement. This was complicated by the expanded role of the state on the economy, which characterized the period of indigenization and nationalization. All these provided opportunity for bureaucratic and executive corruption.

Apparently, the lack of political will to combat the scourge led to the elevation of the menace to inglorious heights. The tendency for post- colonial African leaders to directly engage in looting of public fund, often stashed away in foreign banks did not help matters. High-level official corruption has prevented a credible and effective

crusade against the menace. While these manifestations may be incontestable, corruption affects the over all democratization process in the society. It is a leakage to the resources of the state that could have been channeled to infrastructural development and well-being of the citizenry. Little then one wonders that the Nigerian society offers an endless array of decaying infrastructure and dilapidated social services. Corruption in Nigeria is the failure of the state to perform or live up to its moral and political status. The state is the sole agent of corruption in all its political business and economic ramifications. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, corruption has become a norm and practice of politics among the political class from the presidency to the councilors of local authorities. The furniture mentality, which the political class brought to governance, represents the highest form of corruption and the enslavement of the popular masses of this country (Dukor, 2003).

The housing scam (Ikoyi gate) in 2005 committed by the state and its agents is another dimension to the collective mentality of corruption. In a similar collective unconsciousness, "the financial institutions in Nigeria are pinnacles of corruption. Corruption of course cannot work in a country like Nigeria without them. The introduction and operation of community banks is the most sophisticated form of the exploitation of the underprivileged people of this country..." (Ibid). Similarly, deregulation in the communication sector is the highest stage in the development of the communication industry whereby it becomes part and parcel of the invited mentality of corruption.

Be that as it may, the question goes beyond the constitutional and legal strength of the state to moral and philosophical services issues. First, whether the state is a representative of the creator on earth with absolute righteousness, as Hegel would argue. Connected to this moral and philosophical question is the will of African states, for instance, the Nigerian state to propagate sustainable economic growth, democratic and corrupt-free environment and qualitative development against the dictates of western internationalism and imperialism as well as commitment to African political and economic freedom from the west (Dukor, 2006).

The problem of corruption in Nigeria is a political one, which torches on every facet of the democratic governance of the state. The issue of corruption in Nigeria is a manifestation of the lack of political will on the part of the sovereign and the failure of the state to maintain law and order. Hence, business corruption is a symptom of the failure to grapple with political corruption, which raises questions on the moral uprightness of the state to exist or on the political will of the leadership to

pilot the affairs of the state. It can be argued therefore, that where there is no political corruption is where the state operates under a high moral law and upholds, protects and enforces the rule of law on itself and on its citizenry. This is not the case with Nigeria, where there is high level of contract inflation, embezzlement and diversion of monies in banks, industries and other parasatals.

It has also been argued that accountability of elected representatives to the people is the hallmark of any democratic administration (Mabogunje, 1999). However, democracy in Nigeria has been plunged into crisis by its failure to ensure accountability of the ruler to the ruled as well as the inability of the state to make officials accountable for their actions and bring corrupt ones to justice. This is not to suggest that there are no institutions established to ensure accountability and checkmate corruption, but the best of these institutions has only earned the country the status of being rated second and later third most corrupt country in the world and, among African states, slowing down in the pace of the battle against corruption (The Guardian, February, 2005). The point here is that the phenomenon of corruption ravaging all levels and all arms of government poses serious threats toward the realization of the ideals of democracy (Muhammed, 2006). It is ironic that most elected officers seem to have neglected accountability as their watchword and instead embark on a flagrant abuse of office and embezzlement of public funds.

Furthermore, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) appears to be a compromised set up serving the interest of the ruling party. The gross ineptitude of INEC manifests in the services of upturned election results by the election tribunals, open admittance of election rigging (not without the connivance of INEC). Worse still, some of these actions were allowed to continue in the face of open admittance by the parties involved. The above reasons are pointers to the fact that democracy in Nigeria cannot be adjudged as fulfilling even though we have witnessed a triumphant enthronement of the system on the country. Worthy of note is that, there seem to be a declining faith by citizens in the capacity of democratic institutions, which have been manipulated by profiteering political elite there by weakening the foundation and consolidation of democracy in the country.

#### **COMBATING CORRUPTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY**

Concerned about the devastating effects of corruption on the social, economic and political

foundation of nations and decisions of launching a concerted and collaborative effort to combat it, scholars individuals, parastatals, organizations, both governmental and non-governmental have one time or the other contributed to suggestions of combating corrupt practices to consolidate democracy.

Indeed corruption is one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. It undermines good governance, fundamentally distorts public policy, leads to the misallocation of resources, harms the private sector and particularly hurts the poor. Many aspects of bribery and corruption include accepting gratification, giving or accepting gratification through agent, fraudulent acquisition of property, offences committed through postal system, deliberate frustration of investigation, making false statement or returns of gratification by and through agents, bribery of public officers, using office or position for gratification, bribery transaction, false or misleading statement and attempt (conspiracy) punishable as offences.

In the light of the above demented acts of corruption on our polity and administration in Nigeria, government if democracy must be sustained and maintained should demonstrate the leadership and political will to combat and eradicate it in all sectors of government and society by improving governance and economic management, striving to create a climate that promotes transparency, accountability and integrity in public as well as private endeavours. Also, there is the need for a virile civil society and general empowerment of the citizenry. Such empowerment may take the form of access to information about activities of government agencies. In this direction, the role of the media is indispensable. The mass media owe the nation a responsibility to expose any corrupt agency or official (Saliu and Aremu, 2004).

Furthermore, in the words of Akanbi (2004), the government should not use the anti-corruption commissions for arrest and prosecution of suspected culprits alone but also to provide a mechanism to prevent the malaise from spreading in our society. Besides, democracy can also be sustained if the military (and other forces of violence) are made subordinate to elected civilian control. Obviously, the military need to renounce political activities, be restructured, professionalised and re-oriented for it to be able to defend democracy. This is because civilian control of the armed service is an essential aspect of government of, by and for the people.

In democracy, public policy is decided by the majority subject to the rule of law instead of brute force. There is therefore, the need to de-politicize the armed forces, re-define military priorities, programmes and

commitment, re-assert civilian supremacy and institute strong and effective mechanism for achieving democratic control. Also, to sustain democracy, it would involve among other things, involving protection of human rights and rule of law, strengthening judicial and legislative institution as well as other agencies to hold state power accountable. Others include empowering democratic governance at the local level, ensuring the equal status and full participation of women, empowering marginalized groups to become partners in the restructuring of their societies, invigorating civil society and the autonomous mass media, securing fundamental workers rights, especially freedom of association, ensuring that those who work non-violently for the democratic transformation of their societies are provided the space and resources needed for their task, radical reform and rehabilitation of the educational sector in order to restore and enhance standards, cultivating democratic values and beliefs and resolving conflicts over minority group rights and claims through the spirit and mechanism of democracy.

Above all, attention has been drawn to the need to integrate the domestic control of corruption with existing international instrument against the vice. Such international initiatives include those instituted by the IMF's policy of linking good governance with effective battle to reduce corruption. Similarly the United Nation made a declaration against corruption and bribery in 1996. All these many be integrated with the national efforts to enhance its effectiveness (Saliu and Aremu, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

Corruption is a serious problem negating Nigeria's democratization process. This is because it is bedevil by such problems as mismanagement, wasteful spending and spending States fund on unproductive sectors among others. Though, kudos should be given to the former Nigerian President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo for setting up structures and institutions to fight corruption, this effort has made public office holders to be conscious of their dealings in power. Although, many people have criticized the government of using it as a political weapon, but still to all, it is a very good step in the right direction considering the intensity of the endemic problem of corruption and how it has set the country back in its quest for democratic pursuit.

Therefore, fighting corruption does not necessarily mean a task for government alone. It should be a product of a joint effort by every body in the country. Fighting corruption in Nigeria needs the joint efforts of the private and public sector and even the ordinary citizen. Nigeria

equally needs re-orientation and new value system that will make them commit themselves to government again due to years of lost-confidence.

Full democratization needs serious efforts from the government and commitment of the people. Public office holders should equally renew their commitment towards the people's needs and be more alive to their responsibility. Nevertheless, the strengthening and empowering of the institutions of fighting corruption through law, making them independent and institutionalizing them will go a long way in addressing the hydra-headed monster called corruption.

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