

Corruption and Leadership Crisis in Africa: Nigeria in Focus

Joseph C. Ebegbulem
Department of Political Science
University of Calabar
Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

The independence of African states from colonial rule from the middle part of the 20th century signaled strong prospects and hope for a better and prosperous continent. Today that hope is dashed by bad leadership and corruption. That, after decades of independence, Africa is still home to majority of the world's poor irrespective of the availability of both human and material resources is an embarrassment. The continent is unarguably one of the most fertile regions of the world and the richest continent on earth in terms of natural resources, but today, the image of the world's most resource rich continent has been damaged by corruption and inept leadership. The corruption level of many African leaders in Africa is beyond imagination. The continent's resources are personalized at the expense of the people. Using Nigeria as a case study, we see that abject poverty, inadequate health facilities and unemployment pervade the land and these are borne out of the failure on the part of leadership, and corruption. This paper argues that leadership crisis and corruption are the greatest obstacles to Africa's development. It examines the concept of leadership and corruption in the context of Nigeria; the effects of corruption on Nigeria's democratic stability and economic development. The paper concludes that corruption and inept leadership are responsible for democratic instability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Corruption, Leadership, Democracy, Godfatherism

Introduction

It is not disputable that Africa is the poorest continent in the world, and the richest in terms of natural resources. Today the image of this blessed continent is battered by corruption and leadership crisis. Corruption has tragically devastated African societies and made millions of people destitute. The tentacles of corruption has reached everywhere in the African continent. From the offices of presidents and prime ministers to the smallest administration unit of government, corruption is found everywhere. Crucial to this crisis of corruption engulfing the African continent is the problem of purposeful leadership that could act as architect and engineer of progressive change and development.

In Nigeria which this paper focuses on, we see corruption and inept leadership as a fact of life. It has been argued in many fora that the main problem that has bedeviled Nigeria is poor leadership and corruption. These two have been generally identified as the root causes of Nigeria's socio-economic and political problems. Nigeria's leadership is characterized by such negative features as lack of direction, neglect and drift, fraud and insensitivity to the plight of the citizens. It is no longer news that while the poor in Nigeria are languishing in abject poverty and hunger, squalor, disease and destitution, Nigerian leaders are only after working out strategies on how to enrich and perpetuate themselves in office.

The major problem that the country is facing today is the insincerity and insensitivity of her leaders to the needs of the ordinary people whom they have been elected to serve. Today, at the national, state and local government levels, the Nigerian people have as their leaders a hardcore, small selfish money-minded few individuals who wage political and economic war against the vast masses of exploited and oppressed people. The democracy embraced by Nigerians in 1999 has produced leaders who have blighted the lives of Nigerians who now wallow in poverty, illiteracy, hunger and unemployment. These leaders are corrupt and have criminally mismanaged the country's resources.

Corruption and ineffective leadership have impacted negatively on Nigeria's democratic stability and her economic development. The Nigerian legislature is a product of political corruption as men and women elected into the two legislative chambers got there through election rigging.

Corruption and Leadership: A Conceptual Approach

CORRUPTION: Defining corruption can be, and has been approached in many ways. According to Amuwo (2005) and Obayelu (2007) corruption is the exploitation of public position, resources and power for private gain. In their own conceptualization, Fjeldstad and Isaksen (2008) and Ogundiya (2009) define corruption as “the betrayal of public trust for individual or public gain. Obayelu went further to identify corruption as “efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private gain at public expense; or a misuse of power for private benefit.” Corruption covers a broad spectrum of activities ranging from fraud (theft through misrepresentation), embezzlement (misappropriation of corporate or public funds) to bribery (payments made in order to gain an advantage or to avoid a disadvantage).

Sen (1999) defines corruption or corrupt behavior as “the violation of established rules for personal gains and profit.” From a sociological point of view, Altas (1968) sees corruption as a symptom of dysfunctionality of the relationship between the state and the people, characterized by bribery, extortion and nepotism. From a political point of view, Aiyede (2006) views corruption as “the abuse or misuse of public or governmental power for illegitimate private advantages. His view corroborates that of Lipset and Lenz (2000) assertion that corruption is an effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private benefit at public expense. Such an abuse of public power may not necessarily be for one’s private benefit. It may be for the benefit of one’s party, class, tribe, or family (Tanzi, 1998).

Corruption as phenomenon is a global problem, and exists in varying degrees in different countries. While it is more prevalent in the developing countries like Nigeria and other African countries, the developed countries experience corruption at a minimal level. The important reason for the minimal level in the developed nations is that the control mechanisms are more developed and effective than in the developing countries. The efficacy of control mechanisms in the advance democracies of the world further accounts for the relative political and democratic stability that these countries enjoy.

LEADERSHIP: Ayodele (2006) defines a leader as “an individual appointed to a job with authority, and accountability to accomplish the goals and objectives of the society.” He asserts that a leader must be a good manager as well as an individual who is able to effectively coordinate the activities of followers or a team towards pre-agreed or pre-defined goal or objectives within the limits of available resources. “A leader must be astute with both man and material. A leader must possess the ability to create in the followers the necessary enthusiasm/motivation to put in every necessary effort to deliver on set goals. Thus the ability not only to conceive but also to communicate a vision or idea is of utmost importance as an attribute of leadership. Above all, a leader must first and foremost be a member of his own team, internalize their feelings and galvanize their potentials towards reaching the goal.” (Ibid)

In his conceptualization of leadership, Eze (2002) posits that “all over the world, leadership is the most important number one factor that determines whether a nation can develop”. He argued further that “a leadership that is free, brave, patriotic, people-oriented, destination-bound; the leadership that understands the psychology of leading and applies it to the development of the people must be at the affairs of men” (Ibid).

Anybody in a position of authority as a leader must provide good leadership for his followers. Leadership has to do with the management of people with clearly defined goals or objectives. “It involves mobilizing and motivating people for greater productivity.” It is the ability to operate effectively through other people making them accept the goals of the leader while the leader still has the freedom to do things their way. According to Ajayi (2004), leadership is one of the essential determinants of development and a core ingredient in organizing, mobilizing and inspiring societal resources for the attainment of goals.

One of the most important things about leadership is the ability to inspire. In other words, a leader is one who can inspire, and instill passion and direction to an individual or group of individuals, using his position to affect that group consciously or subconsciously. A leader is the driver or force behind the progress of the people he is leading.

Leadership Crisis in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives

In his discussion on leadership, Lee Kuan Yew, the celebrated father of modern Singapore wrote in his book – “From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965 – 2000” “we need good people to have good government.

However good the system of government, bad leaders will bring harm to their people. On the other hand, I have seen several societies well governed inspite of poor systems of government, because good, strong leaders were in charge.”

The Nigerian society has never been well governed since independence from the British in 1960 because “good, strong leaders” have never been in charge. The Nigerian state, from the first democratic experiment in 1960 to military regimes and back to democracy as practiced today, has been managed by leaders who are selfish and corrupt. They accumulate wealth at the expense of national development without devotion to the cause of the people. Since independence in 1960, the state has produced leaders who have blighted the lives of Nigerians who now wallow in poverty, illiteracy, hunger and unemployment. The leadership of Nigeria in every government, be it civilian or military, has criminally mismanaged the country’s affairs and resources. Nigeria’s political leaders, during electioneering campaigns, make fantastic promises in order to win elections, but as soon as they secure the people’s mandate, the people are shortchanged of the dividends of democracy.

An analysis of the plethora of leaders on Nigeria’s political landscape revealed selfish, mediocre, tribal leaders and opportunistic small money-minded people masquerading as leaders. From Tafawa Balewa (1960 – 1966) to Olusegun Obasanjo (1999 – 2007), the crisis of leadership remains the same.

According to Arthur Nwankwo (1989), Alhaji Tafawa Balewa who ruled Nigeria from 1960-1966 lacked the capacity to chart a progressive course for national development because of lack of consciousness of development; J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi (January – July 1966) who was brought up under the most passive and apolitical circumstances of colonialists military institution neither understood the meaning of politics in general nor was he able to diagnose the specialties of the Nigerian political system whose leadership was placed on his shoulders. He was neither confused nor misled, he was simply ignorant and naïve; General Yakubu Gowon who ruled Nigeria from 1966 – 1975 was apparently the only Head of Government anywhere in the world who had so much money that he did not know what to do with it. The transient national affluence occasioned by the innocent but unsolicited upsurge of mineral resources cast a spell of short-sightedness over Gowon and his reactionary advisers. They mistook the transient flow of petroleum for a permanent future of the Nigerian economy and without conducting a critical analysis of the international market forces which determine the cost of petroleum and its relevant place to national development; General Murtala Muhammed’s coming (July 1975 – February 1976) was revolutionary as well as challenging. He brought a new sense of mission and was radical in his approach to governance. He was cut short by the inordinate ambition of young military officers, who cannot comprehend the firebrand approach to governance. The regime was however short to allow a better assessment.

Although General Olusegun Obasanjo who took over after the assassination of his boss, General Murtala Muhammed, charted a new course for democratic governance and constitutional development, he, however, has a pathological hatred for the intellectuals and did not see any intellectual dimension that is germane to national development. According to Ayodele, “his policy actions were frustrating the Ivory Tower; he starved the universities of funds and began the distortion of the educational institutions through untoward policy action.” (Ayodele, 2006).

Shehu Shagari’s administration (1979-2003) also witnessed leadership crisis. His government did not strive to dismantle the existing power structure and a social relation that has kept Nigeria prostrate. His administration was characterized by a wild appetite for transient materialism (Ibid). In trying to achieve his desired goal of maintaining strict financial discipline and accountability, Buhari who ruled the Nigerian state from 1983to 1985 imprisoned every corrupt politician while draconian decrees were promulgated to check leadership excessiveness. “The leadership folly rested on the conceptualization of the primary purpose of government as the imprisonment of activists and other critiques.”

The military president after Buhari was General Ibrahim Babangida who turned the country to a political laboratory, and came up with a grandiose political transition that was described as the most expensive transition in Africa and at the end produced no democracy. With his intelligence and personal charm, his visionary and innovative program, Babangida could have been placed in a historical vantage position of a leader, however, he was unable to meet it with sincerity and discipline required of good leadership. He institutionalized prebendal politics and made little effort in infrastructure development.

General Sani Abacha who ruled the country between 1993 and 1998 governed with iron-fist. While the entire country became an extension of his personal estate within this space of five years, he amassed so much wealth than most countries in Black Africa. His transmutation agenda was however cut short by divine intervention in 1998 when he died mysteriously. Leadership was thrust on the shoulder of General Abdusalam Abubakar. He was a cool headed and compassionate man, though he emptied the foreign reserves of the country in the name of democratic transition.

The transition process saw General Olusegun Obasanjo coming to power again in 1999, this time as a democratically elected President. His effort at combating corruption was fruitless as he and officials under him were corrupt. He sold government property to himself and his cronies below the cost price. His successor, Alhaji Yar'Adua was an incompetent leader who lacked the qualities of good and strong leader. The people of Nigeria and the world are watching to see the direction of the current administration of President Goodluck Jonathan.

The above graphic analysis of past and present leaders of Nigeria show evidences of massive failure on the part of successive leadership.

Effects of Corruption

Aiyede (2006) posits that “corruption poses a serious development challenge. In the political realm, it undermines democracy and good governance by flouting or even subverting formal process. Corruption in elections and in legislative bodies reduces accountability and distorts representation in policy making; corruption in the judiciary compromises the rule of law; and corruption in public administration results in the unfair and inefficient provision of services. More generally, corruption erodes the institutional capacity of government as procedures are disregarded, resources are siphoned off, and public offices are bought and sold. Thus, corruption undermines the legitimacy of government and democratic values of trust and tolerance.”

Omar et al (2001) assert that evidences abound to suggest that corruption creates major impediments to doing business in countries where it is prevalent. The negative effects of corruption on national development can be monumental, and in any corrupt regime, a nation could lose billions of dollars into the pockets of the nation's leaders. “Corruption exacerbates poverty and disproportionately affects those of lower income because it pulls resources from the national treasuries, placing the money into the bank accounts of a few individuals who are politically powerful. This type of corruption exerts devastating effects on developing economies that desperately need the money.” Based on the above, Igwe (2010) posits that “It is easier for a developed country to weather through the storms of corruption than an emerging economy to do so. This is the reason why growth cannot be expected from African countries enmeshed in corruption. Orthox economic theory teaches that lower investment rates lead to lower rates of economic growth.”

Corruption undermines efficiency as time and money are wasted through corrupt activities at the expense of productive activities and which altogether discourages prospective investors. This weighs on both public administration and private enterprises. Public sector efficiency becomes compromised because corruption superimposes informal practices over the proper rules and procedures of government adding direct and indirect costs to the execution of programmes. Corruption undermines human and capital development in any society or nation.

Corruption also generates economic distortions in the public sector by diverting public investment into capital projects where bribes and kickbacks are more plentiful. It also lowers compliance with construction, environmental, or other regulations, reduces the quality of government services and infrastructure, and increases budgetary pressure on government. Corruption slows down the pace of economic development through manipulation of funds for projects; it destroys or weakens efficiency and effectiveness of public service; it detracts government from giving priority to the areas of income and social inequality, poverty, malnutrition and other areas of need. The net impact of corruption on society is negative.

Corruption and Nigeria's Economic Development

A one-time Vice Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria asserts that “corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian society.” Late Professor Claude Ake of the Centre for Advanced Social Sciences noted that corruption is consolidated in Nigeria partly as a result of the attitude of Nigerians toward the affluent in the society whose source of affluence is questionable.

He observed that “wealthy people who are known to be corrupt are regularly courted and honoured by communities, religious bodies, social clubs and other private organizations.”

Corruption has adversely affected Nigeria’s economy. Financial resources which would have been used to facilitate the country’s economic development have been diverted into private bank accounts abroad. More worrisome is the fact that these stolen funds meant for economic development are not invested in the country to create employment for the unemployed citizens of the country. This is indeed the reason for high level of poverty, insecurity and widespread diseases. Nigeria, in spite of its phenomenal earnings from the exploration and exportation of crude oil, its great human resources and other extensive potentialities, is still predominantly poor as a result of corruption.

The poverty level in Nigeria is worsening as unemployment is soaring on daily basis. The quality of education, health and other social services is dwindling all over the country. The agricultural, general merchandising and other social services which, hitherto, provided employment for the ordinary citizens have become very unattractive.

Corruption undermines Nigeria’s economic development by generating considerable distortions and inefficiency. In the private sector, corruption increases the cost of business through the price of illicit payments. It raises the management cost of negotiating with officials and increases the risk of agreements being breached.

The Human Right Watch (2007) comments that, “despite record-setting government revenues in recent years, corruption and mismanagement remain a major cause of Nigeria’s failure to make meaningful progress in improving the lot of ordinary Nigerians.” It has been argued by observers of the Nigerian political process in recent times that in the face of hardship, believed to have been propelled by widespread corruption, it will be a hard task to convince an average Nigerian to continue to make unending sacrifices and swallow without a limit the bitter economic pills which is not a natural consequence but an inevitably effect of a corrupt system.

The near total collapse of social infrastructure and other social institutions could easily be linked to corruption. This has resulted to retarded and stunted development. Official corruption in Nigeria siphons off money intended for the development of the country. Apart from making profit on investments from Nigeria’s stolen billions of dollars, European countries and banks turn around and loan such money to Nigeria and other African countries at exorbitant rates. Much money is spent in the payment of interest on such loans than is spent on health and education combined. The critical issue in economic development is not whether corruption happens, but whether the stolen money is invested in the country. Massive corruption (as it relates to stealing of public funds) and economic development can co-exist, if the stolen money is invested in the expansion of the country’s productive sector. This reminds one of Igwe’s observation. “In Nigeria, the post-independence elite initially invested their new-found wealth domestically only to see those assets appropriated by incoming administrations. The likes of Sani Abacha who sent an estimated four billion dollars abroad were careful not to repeat the mistake. The thinking is always: I am certain to be probed once I leave power, so I had better put everything abroad.” (Igwe, 2010).

Democratic Instability in Nigeria: A Consequence of Political Corruption

At the heart of democratic instability in Nigeria is corruption and bad leadership. Corruption has not only made a mockery of the basis of the authority of the state, but it poses a great challenge to the legitimacy of democracy as the best form of government. This has consequently led to democratic instability. Corruption has reached a level in Nigeria such that an average Nigerian citizen believes that there is an inextricable link between corruption and democracy.

Political corruption which is a form of corruption perpetrated by the political elite in Nigeria has affected the cognitive perception of Nigerians since the current democratic experiment began in 1999. First there is doubt about the ability of the Nigerian state to organize a free, fair and credible election; second there is this perception that political appointments are one sure way to wealth and elevation of social status; and third, there is also the perception that the political office holders cannot be responsible and accountable to the citizens. The impact of this on democratic stability is clear. Electoral contest has become a do or die affair with the prevalence of contract killings, political assassinations and electoral violence resulting in the general destruction of lives and properties.

“Consequently, as the philosophical basis and fundamental ethos of democracy are being swept under the carpet, the Nigerian electorate expectedly lost faith not only in the electoral process, but fundamentally on the government which a fraudulent process produced.” (Ogundiya, 2006) The legitimacy of democracy as the best form of government has been seriously eroded. More distressing to democratic stability is godfatherism in Nigerian politics. “One of the major damaging consequences of corruption in Nigeria in the recent time is the emergence of political ‘kingmakers’ and gladiators commonly known as the political godfathers”. Godfatherism has created a lot of problems in the Nigerian democratic process. It is one of the biggest dangers to democracy in Nigeria.

Elections would remain a farce when they are not rule-compliant. Democracy is rule-driven and no election can be better than the extent to which people obey electoral rules. Godfatherism has created doubt about the legitimacy of the electoral process and the elected as the godfathers violate the integrity of the electoral process in Nigeria.

Reviewing the corrupt nature of godfatherism and its effects on democratic stability in Nigeria, Gambo posits that “the phenomenon of godfatherism fits into what Richard Joseph persuasively described as “Prebendal politics”. Joseph attributed the prebendal nature of politics to the excessive premium on political power which makes Nigerians have unfaltering faith in the belief that political power holds the key to limitless resources in the land. This belief was reinforced and consolidated during military rule which was characterized by irrational and obsessive acquisition of wealth through brazen corrupt practices. This indeed provides the overriding motivation for godfathers to aid godsons get into elective public offices and use them for self-enrichment and to shield them against the long arm of the law.” (Gambo, 2006)

When, therefore, few individuals who are in the minority become too powerful to dictate for the rest, the integrity of the process of choosing leaders is compromised. This leads to total absence of culture of accountability and it negates one of the normative attributes of democracy which is a responsible and accountable government. Good governance predicated on the rule of law, due process, accountability, transparency in the management of public space is precariously compromised. (Ibid) This poses serious threat to the growth and stability of democracy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The expectations of Africans that their leaders, after independence, would bring development to their various independent states were met by corruption and abysmal failure of leadership to harness the vast human and natural resources available in the continent for the benefit of the African people. The continent’s resources are personalized at the expense of the people. What pervades in the states of the continent is abject poverty, inadequate health facilities, unemployment and inadequate shelter for the people.

The Nigerian experience shows the failure of her leaders from independence till date to stimulate the Nigerian people to the path of socio-economic and political development. The near total collapse of social infrastructure and other institutions is traceable to massive corruption and leadership crisis. “Corruption has greatly eroded the fundamental values of democracy and the essential principle that government should be representative and accountable to the citizens. Invariably, the Nigerian political leaders as it is presently constituted lack the moral fibres to champion the cause of the Nigeria society. When political leaders are perceived to be pursuing their personal interests excessively, citizens become disenchanted, questioning the legitimacy of leaders and the state, and even the legitimacy of the process and the system that produced them.”

Corruption has become prevalent and has not only greatly eroded the basis of the authority of the state but also challenge the legitimacy of democracy as the best form of governance. The problem of democratic instability persists because the political system has failed to engender, maintain and sustain the belief in Nigerians that democracy is the most appropriate system for them. Democratic stability will be difficult to attain in Nigeria as long as corruption remains endemic and unchecked and leadership crisis persists.

This paper has been able to demonstrate that corruption and inept leadership have robbed Nigerians, the government which they chose to represent and pursue their interest and the consequence is that democratic instability is inevitable.

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