CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: A SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Endemic corruption represents a major obstacle to economic development and social welfare in Africa and the rest of the developing world. Thus, there are a large number of analyses of the phenomenon, which tended to be social scientific in character. Few philosophers, beyond grappling with the analysis of the concept, have done any substantive work to shed some light on the nature and implication of official corruption.

With the immediately preceding observation as its point of departure, this paper seeks to examine the menace of corruption from a philosophical perspective. Specifically, it provides some philosophical insights on the question of the origin of corruption and deployed the concept of social justice in the analysis of the former. From this perspective, it demonstrates that in perpetuating a form of social injustice which may have a debilitating effect on our aspiration to nationhood and the establishment of a just political order, official corruption is nothing but act of treason. Given the grave consequences of corruption, the paper recommends an integrated approach to tackling the menace, which includes character training, the abolition of plea bargaining and very stringent penalties for the corrupt public officials.

Keywords : Corruption, Development, Nation building, Nigeria and Social justice.

Introduction

It is a commonplace knowledge within academic and policy circles that endemic corruption represents a major obstacle to economic development and social welfare in Africa and the rest of the developing world. Nigeria has been a prominent victim of the menace of corruption. Thus, despite her rich endowment of natural resources, she remains of poorest nations in the world (Dukeh, 2025) Nigeria for, instance, is one of the largest oil producers in the world yet she suffers from an acute shortage of basic infrastructure, a stagnated economy and widespread poverty. This perhaps explains the motivation of the campaign against corruption initiated by the Obasanjo administration shortly after Nigeria's return to democracy on the 29th of May, 1999. Unfortunately, while the rhetoric of anti-corruption is now extremely popular in the Nigerian political arena, the incidence of corruption and related vices has witnessed an unprecedented upswing. Onimode (2001, p.31) aptly, captures Nigeria's further descent into the abyss of corruption when he says it was not only that officials were corrupt, but corruption was official and 'lootocracy' became a new diatribe for governance…".

Expectedly, given the persistent and progressively worsening problem of corruption in Nigeria, there are many analyses of the phenomenon. But these tended to be economistic or social scientific in character. Few philosophers, beyond the question of grappling with the analysis of the concept, have not done any substantive work to shed some light on the nature and implication of official corruption. It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine the origin of corruption from a philosophical perspective and employs the concept of social justice in the analysis of the menace. From this perspective, it demonstrates that in perpetuating a form of social injustice which may have a debilitating effect on our aspiration to nationhood and the establishment of a just political order, official corruption is nothing but act of treason. Given the grave consequences of corruption, the paper concludes that the menace must be met with stringent and extreme measures.

To fully explore the central argument of this paper, it has been segmented into four sections. The first examines the conceptual framework around which the entire discourse is woven; the second outlines some philosophical explanation of the incidence of corruption. The third plots the

connection between corruption and social justice. In the final segment we highlight and discuss measures could be deployed to deter corruption and move Nigeria away from the brink of disintegration and collapse.

Conceptual Clarifications

Concept of Corruption

Corruption is one universally ubiquitous phenomenon which can take different forms and dimensions. Thus, capturing all its hues and shades in a single definition is anything but an easy task. This explains why the literature is replete with a plethora of definitions of corruption. Mbaku(1998, p.34) in his essay "Bureaucratic & Political Corruption in Africa" conceptualized corruption as the performance associated with a public office, and deviations from the law as institutions that regulate the behavior of public servants. Although, Mbaku's definition seeks to be specific in delineating the boundaries of corruption, it is rather narrow, since it reduces corruption to a legal phenomenon. An act is not primarily corrupt because it violates a legal norm, but because it deviates from a moral norm. It is possible for instance that an act conforms to certain legal requirement, and yet be declared as corrupt. According to Miller (2023) Prior to 1977, U.S. companies who offer bribes to secure foreign contracts, were not engaging in an unlawful act. But such actions are still morally blame worthy and could be described as corrupt. Corruption, is therefore, is not necessarily an illegality. "…Corruption is not at bottom simply a matter of law; rather it is fundamentally a matter of morality."

According to Doig and Theobald (2000, p.3), it is helpful to identify the essence of political corruption as the abuse of public authority for private profit. In similar definition, Werlin (1973) says corruption is the diversion of public resources to non-public purposes, while Bayley (1966, p.720) contends that beyond its close affinity with the act of bribery, corruption is "… a more general term covering the misuse of authority as a result of consideration of personal gain, which need not be monetary," The common denominator between this definition is that corruption involves the abuse of public authority for private gain. Again, the definition fails to capture the different shades of corruption. Miller (2023) provides to examples that appears to confound this conceptualisation of corruption. According to him, some acts of corruption could involve abuse of public authority without culminating in personal gain. Imagine a judge who frames an innocent citizen to prevent an imminent riot. This act of framing an innocent person will amount to corruption but it does necessarily involve private gain. On the other hand, if a rich bettor bribes a football team to lose a crucial match so that he could win a bet, he/she unjustly procures a personal gain without necessarily being a public official. Based on the above reflections, we may submit that corruption is not always about personal gain, nor is it the exclusive preserve of public officials

In his 1996 paper, *Corruption in Nigeria: Historical perspective*, Osoba, provides a most comprehensive definition of corruption:

> Corruption in my view is a form of anti-social behaviour by an individual or social group which confers unjust or fraudulent benefits on its perpetrators, is inconsistent with the established legal norms and prevailing moral ethos of the land and is likely to subvert or diminish the capacity of the legitimate authorities to provide fully for the material and spiritual wellbeing of all members of society in a just and equitable manner. (Osoba, p.372.)

Aside from the erroneous view that corruption always confers unjust benefit on his perpetrators, Osoba's definition highlights the fact that corruption is at its core a phenomenon that is characterised by a violation of moral norms. More importantly the definition gestures at the aim of this paper which is to show that corruption and social injustice are intimately interconnected.

Although we have demonstrated from the foregoing analyses, that corruption goes beyond employing public authority for personal gain, the focus of this paper is political or official corruption, which is essentially about public officials who deploys his authority illegitimately or illegally to advance his own interest at the expense of the public good. With specific reference to Nigeria, the manifestation of official corruption includes, but is not limited to, the inflation of government contracts in return for kick-backs, frauds and falsification of accounts in public service. It also involves the taking of bribes and perversion of justice among the police, the judiciary and other organs for administering justice and the various heinous crimes against the state in business and industrial sector of the economy, in collusion with multinational companies such as over invoicing of goods (Anifowoshe, 2002, p.110). Obviously, while the list of actions deviating from public morality listed above may include purely financial and economic corruption, it needs to be reiterated that our focus in this article is official corruption, that is, the abuse of public office for the purpose of private gain.

Concept of Social Justice

The second concept that is central to the ongoing discourse in this paper is social justice. In what follows we will attempt to shed some light on the nature of social justice. Social Justice is a subcategory of the more general notion of justice. In its broadest sense justice is often equated with morality. Justice in this sense is said to comprise the whole virtue of complete conformity with approved patterns of moral conduct. As Barry (1995) noted, the rules of justice are deemed to have special obligatory force just like other moral commands. In other words, the demands of justice are not optional; they make a compelling claim on our moral sentiments. Philosophers, however, insist on a distinction between justice and morality (Ibid., p.151). For example, we may criticize certain social practices such as incest, polygamy and homosexuality as immoral, but we are unlikely to argue that they are unjust. The essence of the above distinction is to highlight a peculiar characteristic of justice –the idea that justice is a distributive concept. In other words, justice is primarily concerned with the way that rewards and punishment and so on are distributed in society. This leads us to social justice.

Usually designated as distributive justices, social justice deals with how benefits and burdens ought to be distributed within a society. Put differently, the basic question of social justice is how to ensure that social goods (e.g., rights, duties, property, income taxes, and public offices) are distributed in such a way as to be morally defensible (Irele, 1998). A society where social goods are distributed without impartiality and arbitrariness is said to have satisfied the principles of social justice, while one that does not, is regarded as an unjust society.

The definition of justice above certainly begs an all-important question: what specific principles will bring about an impartial or a fair distribution of social goods? Different thinkers of divergent ideological persuasions have provided several answers. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to examine the different responses that have been elicited by this question. It would Suffice to say, following Rawls, that in spite of the various conceptions of how justice is to be actualized, there is near consensus that social goods ought not be distributed on the grounds of arbitrary distinctions or partiality. Rawls (1999, p.5) bears been quoted at length:

> Those who hold different conceptions of justice can, then, still agree that institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties and when the rules determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life. Men can agree to this description of just institutions since the notions of an arbitrary distinction and of proper balances, which are included in the concept of justice, are left open for each to interpret according to the principles of justice that he accepts.

Thus, the notion of social justice is not a concept of vague and imprecise meaning as Hayek (1976, cited in Ben, 1993, p.147) will have us believe. Social justice points to the impartial and fair distribution of the benefits and burden within a given society, or to put it slightly differently, it involves the impartial consideration of the interest of everybody in the distribution of social goods (Nielsen, 2004:81). The ultimate goal of social justice is the protection of the interest of every member of the society, particular in the distribution of social goods to ensure that each individual has enough to maintain a minimally decent existence.

Philosophical Roots of Corruption

Corruption, though often regarded as graft and greed, is more profound than the juridical vocabularies used to describe it. Corruption is squarely a crisis of being, a distortion within the human spirit, and a dereliction of the structure of community. Corruption is an integral part of an ontological dissonance going on in the perpetrators (Tillich, 1952, p.47). From Plato's ancient reflections on justice to the moral contemplations of Soren Kierkegaard and the social skepticism of Bertrand Russell, we can see that corruption is not a mere administrative defect but a manifestation of moral alienation. It is, as it were, the decay of the soul's alignment with the Good.

Plato, in *The Republic*, situates the origin of corruption within the disordered soul. When reason becomes enslaved by appetite and ambition, the polity mirrors this inner chaos. The corruption of the city proceeds from the corruption of its rulers, and the corruption of rulers arises when *thymos* (spiritedness) and *epithumia* (desire) overwhelm *logos* (reason) (Plato, trans. 1992, pp. 435e–440b). Yet, as Plato submits, this fall is not accidental. It is the consequence of neglecting character education and the shallow understanding of virtue. Corruption really is a slow substitution of the ideal for the expedient. It begins in epistemic darkness when truth loses its sacredness and utility masquerades as the good.

Centuries after Plato removed the veil from the discourse on corruption, Thomas Hobbes who grounded political life in fear and survival in the *Leviathan*, describes the state of nature as a war of all against all, a brutal theater where self-preservation is the only law (Hobbes, 1996, p.84). Corruption, within this Hobbesian framework of fear and survival, is not a deviation but a continuation of nature by political means. If man is fundamentally self-seeking, then the institutions he builds will inevitably mirror that impulse. Thus, the corruption of public life is merely the institutionalization of private fear, the transformation of insecurity into political greed (Hobbes, pp. 1651-1996). Hobbes exposes the tragic paradox when he suggested that the very structures designed to restrain human corruption become its instruments.

Bertrand Russell, approaching this subject from a secular rationalist perspective, identifies another layer which is the corruption of reason itself under the domination of power. In *Power: A New Social Analysis*, Russell observes that men pursue power not merely for its utility but for the intoxication it provides, a psychological corruption that transforms rational pursuit into pathological obsession (Russell 1938, pp. 11–13). The will to power, unbothered by ethical restraint, gives births to the modern bureaucrat whose cleverness exceeds his conscience. For Russell, corruption thus emerges where intelligence serves domination rather than truth, where knowledge, detached from moral purpose, becomes an accomplice to tyranny.

Kierkegaard (1980) addressed the issue of corruption with an even deeper disquiet. For him, corruption is the sickness of despair, the individual's refusal to become himself before God. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he names this refusal as "the despair of defiance," in which man wills to be his own creator, rejecting dependence and accountability (Kierkegaard, Ibid., p.68). Modern corruption, Kierkegaard would say, is not primarily economic but existential. The self's rebellion against the ethical demand of authenticity. To live without inwardness, to act without self-examination, is already to be corrupted. The bureaucrat who takes bribes is only the physical manifestation of an earlier spiritual emptiness.

But it is not enough to moralize. One must interpret corruption historically. The modern age, as Hannah Arendt later discerned, has desacralized both politics and conscience. The loss of transcendence, of a horizon beyond mere utility, has produced what can be called the *economized soul*, a being who measures all value in terms of profit, not purpose. Here corruption stops to be an exception and becomes the atmosphere of social life. The global economy, cloaked in the rhetoric of efficiency, sanctifies precisely the greed that ancient philosophy condemned (Arendt, 1958, p.136).So, we see that corruption is not first in the pocket but in the imagination. It begins where truth becomes negotiable, where fear replaces reverence, and where the self, detached from community, becomes its own idol. Plato (1992) would diagnose this as the fall from the Form of the Good, Hobbes would see it as the triumph of the natural state within civil order, Russell would see it as the perversion of reason by domination, Kierkegaard, as despair masquerading as freedom.

The African condition, in particular, exposes this ailment in its most brutal form. Postcolonial corruption is not merely moral weakness, it is the residue of a colonized ontology, a people compelled to imitate systems that were never designed for their dignity. The colonial state, built on extraction, trained its inheritors in the art of self-enrichment. Thus, corruption in Africa is a tragic continuation of a history of dispossession, where the imitation of power supplants the pursuit of justice (Nkrumah 1965, p.42)

Nexus Between Corruption, Social Justice and the Crisis of Nation-Building

The linkage between Corruption, social justice and nation building is as complex as it is multidimensional. It therefore becomes analytically imperative that the connections between these seemingly disparate practices and processes be made explicit. To begin with, it must be pointed up that justice is the normative glue that binds individuals together in society by fostering a sense of solidarity. Injustice, on the other hand, destroys that glue and, at the most extreme, can lead to disintegration. Nwabueze (1993, p.) makes this point quite poignantly:

> *Justice is the condition in which the individual can feel able to identify with the society, feel at one with it, and accepts its rulings. An unjust society cannot maintain its unity and cohesion, because it cannot arouse in its members a strong feeling of loyalty and allegiance. In-justice not only alienates the individual's loyalty, what is worse, it also arouses him to disaffection. An individual or group denied recognition by the society cannot but feel alienated and disaffected (p.139)*

Beyond the general point that injustice fragments solidarity, let us further explore corruption as a most virulent form of social injustice and its harmful impact on nation building. It is common knowledge that official corruption adversely impinge on economic growth and development. Corruption, for instance leads to the diversion of public funds away from productive activities to rent–seeking, it impedes investments and consolidates patronage networks as the principal channel for the distribution of economic opportunities and state's resources (Kpundeh, p.122.). Diamond (2004) description of the impact of corruption on development is quite graphic:

> *Public infrastructure decays or is never built because the resources from the relevant ministries are diverted to private ends. Decisions on public expenditure are tilted towards unproductive investments in sophisticated weapons and white elephant construction projects that can deliver large kickbacks to the civilian officials and the military officers that award them. Bridges and buildings collapse because bribery circumvented building standards. Rivers are poisoned for a similar reason. Schools are not built or maintained, clinics are not stocked and staffed, and roads are not paved on repaired because the funds for these essential dimensions of development are squandered or stolen(pp.224-5).*

Unfortunately, the decay of infrastructure, the institutionalization of patronage system and loss of investment and development opportunities induced by corruption, exacerbates the level of inequality and poverty in the society (Assobie,2011). Thus, the masses that are cut off from the patronage networks are alienated, while groups lacking direct access to the corridors of power are marginalized. In this atmosphere, inter-groups struggle for power become rife and social cohesion is jeopardized. Assobie (2011) poignantly captures this point when says

> *Corruption also damages the society. It destroys mutual trust. It feeds on the mechanical solidarity between ethnic hegemons and their less privileged kith and kin and transforms it into a patron client pattern of organic solidarity bonded on cash nexus. It undermines social cohesion as it individuates social connections and predicates all social ties on greed and gain (Ibid. pp. 8-9).*

The criminal hijack of public funds for private use constitutes a social justice issue and negatively impacts on nation building in other ways. Official corruption for instance violates what Nozick (1974) calls the "principle of just acquisition" which requires that holdings could only be retained, if they are justly acquired. Similarly, it contravenes Rawls difference principle, which demanded that social and economic inequalities should be distributed to favour the most disadvantaged (Rawls, 1999). In short, what official corruption entails is a violent refusal to allow the principles of social justice regulate the process of the distribution of societal wealth. By amassing wealth in the fraudulent diversion of public funds to private ends, the action of the corrupt official constitutes social injustice in several ways. In the first place, he illegitimately appropriates a portion of the wealth that belongs to a commonwealth. In the second, and more importantly, he further impoverishes the masses and reinforces their vulnerability to the triune evils of hunger, morbidity and mortality by diverting funds that could have been channeled to the development of the critical infrastructure and welfare services. Unfortunately, the cumulation of distributional injustices arising from the unprecedented massive looting of the Nigerian treasuries through the days of the military to civilian rule only served to deepen the grievances of the generality of the masses and marginalized groups as well as generate conflict-ridden ethnic politics.

Suggestions

Given the endemic character of corruption in Nigeria, many analysts are skeptical about the prospects of winning the war against corruption. One analyst for instance, acknowledged in despair that stopping corruption in Nigeria is akin to stopping a he-goat from eating yams (1bn Isah, 2023). Unfortunately, this is the position of many Nigerians. Notwithstanding the skepticism that have greeted anti-corruption campaigns, if we adopt an integrated approach, incorporating systematic character training programmes, appropriate legal measures, the mobilization of political will and civil society, the incidence of official corruption can be diminished if not totally abolished.

A cursory analysis of the philosophical roots of corruption indicates that corruption is the result of the perversion of human nature or the ruination of the human soul. One major response to the challenge therefore is for society to institute an extensive system of character training to actualise the virtues that are the potentialities of human nature. Building on the Aristotelian insight that moral virtues are not innate endowment but traits that could be developed through practice and habituation,(trans.2009), and the well-established notion that children are highly impressionistic, education at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels should be deliberately crafted to enhance the process of cultivating moral excellence in the upcoming generations.

In addition, there is a need to strengthen the legal framework in the fight against corruption. While the Nigerian legal system incorporates clear anti-corruption provisions such as the existence of a code a conduct for public officers, legislative oversight and judicial determination of the cases of corruption, declaration of assets by public officer.(Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,

1999"). It also contains certain contradictory provisions that weakens the anti- corruption war. This includes the immunity clauses of section 308 of the Constitution and the practice of plea bargaining (Oyewo,2007). To strengthen the legal infrastructure for combating corruption, Nigeria must drop the immunity clauses and stop the practice of plea bargaining. If anything, immunity clauses shield top public official from criminal prosecution relating to acts or practice of corruption, while plea bargaining guarantees a convenient escape route for corrupt public officials. Plea–bargaining obviously promotes a situation where corruption is a "high-profit, low risk activity"(Kpundeh,2004, p.125).

In order to effectively transform corruption into high-risk and low-reward venture, the legal sanctions for such criminal behaviour must become extremely stringent. Given, as our analysis has revealed, that official corruption amount to a treasonable offence, the death penalty, life imprisonment, confiscation of properties are the appropriate sanctions for dealing with the menace of official corruption. Of course, liberals are wont to argue that these penalties are ruthless. We must not forget however that as nation we are caught in a bind: it is either we allow official corruption to destroy us or we destroy official corruption. It is in the light of the latter alternative that we support the stringent sanctions. Moreover, if we are to examine comparative data, it is clear that grave penalties, such as decapitation and hanging explain the low incidence of official corruption in China and Singapore.

Constitutional provisions for stringent sanctions on their own will not translate to an antidote against corruption, if the sanctions are not effectively enforced. Kpundeh's observation on this issue is quite instructive,

> *For rules to be effective, they must be accompanied by mechanisms of monitoring that ensures that violations of rules are detected (the information function accountability) But must also be complemented with mechanisms of enforcement that 'get the incentives right by keeping acts of cheating from going unpunished (the enforcement dimension of accountability) (2004, p.135).*

Unfortunately, one reason for the entrenchment of corruption in the public ethos of the Nigerian society is the near absence of, or the shoddiness in the enforcement of the extant anti-corruption laws. The experience in Nigeria for instance shows that the enforcement of anticorruption laws is anything but consistent: only "small fries" are occasionally prosecuted, while the "big Fishes" are rarely brought to book.

These fundamental shortcomings are responsible for the ineffectiveness of the anti- corruption campaigns. In fact, it could be argued that one major reason why the bid to change the culture of corruption has failed so far in Nigeria is due to lack of political will on the part of the ruling elite. It is for this reason that the civil society domestic and international community remains the only bastion of hope in the anti-corruption campaign. On the shoulders of the domestic arm of the civil society in particular lie onerous responsibility of mobilizing the necessary political pressure on the corrupt and corruption condoning political class to enforce the moral rules of engagement that concerns the management of public funds.

Conclusion

The primary intention of this paper is to demonstrate that corruption is to deeply interconnect with the idea of social justice and national integration. We have argued that official corruption which often involves the massive looting of the state treasury does not only perpetuate social injustice by truncating developmental possibilities that could lead to the amelioration of poverty, but it also fragments the fragile bonds of solidarity in a multiethnic state like Nigeria. In other words, official corruption is grave offence against the nation and the state, given that it could ultimately result in national disintegration. For this reason, and in the light of our analysis of the philosophical roots of corruption, we have recommended an integrated approach to fighting the corruption menace,

which includes character training, the abolition of plea bargaining and very stringent penalties for the venal public officials who deprive the masses of critical social amenities and infrastructure by fraudulently hijacking the commonwealth.

Many Nigerians are justifiably skeptical about the prospects of the top-down anti-corruption programme that is currently in place. Thus, we canvas the position that turning the tide of government operation in the direction of accountability, probity and transparency requires the deliberate involvement of the civil society in the anticorruption war. Without a civil society that heavily mobilized against corruption, social injustice and all other reckless official vices and corruption will continue to fester.

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