

Bureaucratic Corruption in Nigeria: A General and Sociological Insight into the Problem

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ABSTRACT Corruption is incipient in all human societies and in most human activities. Besides, it has distorted and retrogressed development. The increasing wave of widespread corruption in the Nigerian bureaucracies should therefore be of concern to all and sundry. This concern derives from the fact that the bureaucracies are expected to be avenues through which socio-economic policies and developmental efforts could be enhanced and sustained. The paper focused on the problem from sociological and general perspectives. The origin, causes and manifestations of bureaucratic corruption were identified and discussed. The literature revealed that the problem is largely traceable to breakdown in societal values and constraints rather than to individual dispositions. The paper therefore suggested some categorical imperatives for alleviating the problem. This includes the implementation of radical changes in the value-system, making the socio-economic conditions of the nation more favourable to the working and governing classes, erring bureaucrats should be made to face the law to serve as a deterrence to others, the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Bureau, a reduction in bureaucratic protocols and procedures, and finally the establishment of a National Ethics Commission was suggested to re-orientate the people. The paper concluded by saying that bureaucratic corruption is not desirable and as such must be dealt with squarely and head-on at all fronts. Apart from everything else, it could undermine the basis of order, progress and development in a country.

INTRODUCTION

This paper dealt with two somewhat elusive concepts and their complex interaction; bureaucracy and corruption. We are particularly concerned with the way corruption has been institutionalized in the various bureaucracies in Nigeria.

Without entering into the age old debate about the relevant conceptual meaning of bureaucracy itself, we can simply state that 'Bureaucracy' is a type of organization marked by a clear hierarchy of authority, the existence of written rules of procedure, and staffed by full-time salaried officials (Giddens, 1996). The concept corruption, like bureaucracy, comes with a mixed bag of affective and pejorative perceptions. The reason

is not far fetched, typical of most social science concepts, there are divergent opinions on what constitutes corruption. This notwithstanding, the definition given by Dwivendi (1967) seems to be appropriate here. According to him, corruption includes "nepotism, favouritism, bribery, graft and other unfair means adopted by government employees and the public alike to extract some socially and legally prohibited favours".

Nye (1967) in another instance described corruption as the process of obtaining material enrichment or opportunities for the same, for oneself and/or for others, through the use of public office (or influence) in ways other than those publicly acknowledged through the rules and procedures of that office. In another instance, Kanu and Osunbajo (1990) defined bureaucratic corruption as the "act of turning power and authority into ready cash".

In our own scheme of things, bureaucratic corruption is seen as any form of inducement or gratification 'given and taken' in order to do some official work or assignment which ought to be done as a normal routine, or to jump some official protocols or bend some rules and regulations. Thus bureaucratic corruption entails an intricate network of favours provided only in exchange for other favours rendered, anticipated or expected. In essence therefore, bureaucratic corruption deals with the ways and manner in which all forms of corruption has been institutionalized in the Nigerian bureaucracies.

There is now the inevitable need to focus exclusively on the Nigerian bureaucracies so as to delimit the scope of this paper and at the same time make the discussions that will follow here more meaningful. Anise (1986) provided an elastic conception of the Nigerian bureaucracies. Included in the elastic view are:

(1) Civil services of all the thirty six state governments, the seven hundred and seventy four local governments and the federal civil service.

(2) Parastatal and public enterprise bureaucracies; (3) Armed forces bureaucracy; (4) Internal security or Police bureaucracy; (5) Universities and other institutions of higher education bureaucracy; (6) Teaching service bureaucracy; (7) Judicial service bureaucracy; (8) Public media bureaucracy; (9) Political party bureaucracy; (10) Private sector bureaucracy.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It would be an understatement to say that corruption is our bane. It is the greatest cankerworm that has eaten deep into the marrows of our public and private lives. The manifestations of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria is seen and exhibited in our functionless public utilities such as the refineries, ill-equipped hospitals and schools, bad roads, poor telephone and electricity services, 'Kwashikored' rail and our transport systems. Coupled with these is the daily sinking value of the naira, the porosity of our borders, traffic in narcotics, looting of the public treasury, and the coercive and arbitrary use of power, especially by members of the armed forces. It is a tragedy of unimaginable proportion.

Corruption is the one element which completely distorts and defeats the noble objectives of every policy, institution, organisation or project in Nigeria. In the past, corruption has derailed several development projects and policies, thereby exacerbating poverty and socio-economic injustice in the country. For Nigeria to achieve economic take-off and sustainable growth and development, the ubiquitous element of corruption must be vigorously tackled with a view to drastically reducing, if not completely eliminating it. Again Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) contend that in the post-colonial phase, the state assumed a much broader range of activities and policy agenda and had a much wider reach than its colonial predecessor. This made the bureaucracies more amenable to societal pressures and more open to clientelistic relationships. The need to reform Nigerian bureaucratic structures to ensure efficiency and reduce the likelihood of corruption is obvious. Following from the above, the increasing wave of widespread corruption in the Nigerian bureaucracies should be of concern to all and sundry. This concern derives from the fact that bureaucracies are expected to be avenues through which developmental efforts could be enhanced and sustained.

Whatever may be the roles of the Nigerian bureaucracies in the pursuit of planned change, the specific relationship between bureaucracies and socio-political and economic development cannot be ignored. Whatever will hinder or obstruct the effective and efficient functioning of the Nigerian bureaucracies must be addressed squarely and at all fronts because it has extended arms and penetrating tentacles into all areas of human endeavour be it social, political or economic.

It is the position of this paper that in order to come to grips with the multi-dimensional nature of the problem of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria, an all embracing approach is appropriate. This is to enable us to have a comprehensive view and at the same time be able to analyze bureaucratic corruption within the larger purview of an amoral state.

THE LITERATURE

The Udoji Report (1974) charged the Nigerian bureaucracies with nepotism, ethnic loyalties, sectionalism, and more importantly corruption. The report also concluded that not only is the entire bureaucracy corrupt, it was not results - oriented.

Thus when the Muritala/Obasanjo regime took over the reins of power in 1975, one of the first step it took was the massive purge of the bureaucracies. More than ten thousand top level bureaucrats were sacked on grounds ranging from old age, inefficiency, declining productivity, drunkenness, to conduct not in the interest of the public trust and most importantly corruption (Anise, 1986).

According to Amucheazi (1980) the bureaucrats running the nation's bureaucracies were tainted with the cankerworm of corruption, ethnicity and sectionalism. Evidence abounds of their active participation in the power struggle among politicians. They aided and abetted election rigging, manipulation of census, falsification of reports, and frustration or poor implementation of development plans. In another instance Anise (1986) stated that routine bureaucratic services have been slowly converted into an intricate network of favours provided only in exchange for other favours rendered or expected.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

A satisfactory account of the nature of deviance

must be sociological, for what deviance is depends on the social institutions of a society or nation. One of the most important aspects of sociological thinking about crime vis a vis corruption is an emphasis on the interconnections between conformity and deviance in different social contexts. According to Giddens (1996) modern societies contain many different subcultures, and behaviour that conforms to the norms of a particularly subcultural setting may be regarded as deviant outside it. For instance, we may think of a civil or public service subculture in which a bureaucrat might want to 'prove himself' by amassing wealth. Thus in this subculture, to steal or use official position to enrich oneself may not necessarily be an act of deviance. Crime like stealing and burglary not surprisingly, are carried out mainly by people from the poorer segments of the population. Other deviant acts like embezzling, abuse of office and the likes, are by definition limited to persons in positions of some affluence or authority (Box, 1983).

Durkheim (1974) theorized that corruption or any act of deviance is a result of *anomie*. Durkheim developed the notion of *anomie* to refer to the thesis that in modern societies, traditional norms and standards become undermined, without being replaced by new ones. *Anomie* exists when there are no clear standards to guide behaviour in a given area of social life. In these circumstances, Durkheim, believed, people feel disoriented and anxious; *anomie* is therefore one of the social factors influencing dispositions to bureaucratic corruption.

Theorizing in the Macro perspective, Ekeh (1975) and Ake (1993) among others have linked the causes of bureaucratic corruption to the failure of the post colonial state in Africa to meet the short and long term interests of the people. According to these scholars, the state does not exist to advance the interests of the generality but has turned out to be an instrument in the hands of some privileged bureaucrats to exploit and oppress the people. Ekeh contended that two publics are discernible in African states with the different moral imperatives. These are: (1) the primordial realm and (2) civil public. The primordial realm is governed by the moral imperative which makes stealing an act of deviance. In this realm, emphasis is on what will benefit the people collectively while the pursuit of parochial interest is given minimal attention. The people get more attraction and

protection from it because it is the collective interest that predominates in policy formations and decisions.

However, the civic public does not enjoy the same loyalty, patronage, commitment and confidence because it is nothing more than a coercive and oppressive structure which does not protect and cater for the people's welfare and well-being. This is the more reason why stealing from the civic public is not seen as an act of deviance, nor ethically or morally wrong by those who are oriented to the primordial realm.

Thinking along the same line, Joseph (1987) came up with the theoretical postulation that bureaucratic corruption is prevalent in Nigeria because people make use of public offices as prebend to meet the short and long term interests of individuals or group of individuals rather than those of the general populace. There is usually a patron-client network by bureaucrats who are usually all out to see to the continued prebendalization to meet the individual, family and sectional interests. This is because the Nigerian bureaucracies are not governed by moral ethics recognized by all in society as binding beyond their legal rational justification.

We want to conclude this section by reiterating that bureaucratic corruption as a subcategory of deviant behaviour involves such a variety of forms of activity. Therefore it is unlikely that we can produce a single theory which would account for all forms of this criminal conduct. Each of the theoretical standpoints we have looked at has a contribution to make to understanding either some aspects or some types of corruption.

We now turn to an examination of the causes of bureaucratic corruption in modern societies, giving particular attention to the phenomenon in Nigeria.

CAUSES OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

In the literature, the problem of bureaucratic corruption is often seen as a moral problem. According to Ekekwe (1986) it is seen as a problem which is easily traced to 'traditional' mores and customs and therefore more rampant in 'developing' nations, as a problem made more acute by large income disparities which exist in these societies. The problem of bureaucratic corruption can be conveniently traced to the

following underlisted factors.

1. Radical changes in the value-system or breakdown in societal norms. This according to Lurkheim (1974), usually leads to a situation of normlessness, that is, the lack of regulating norms. In this situation, the individual bureaucrat begins to do things that are against the norms and ethics of his work or profession and this is usually exhibited in corrupt practices. As a matter of fact, social values have continued to decline as the get rich quick syndrome has led to numerous cases of corrupt practices. The bureaucrats no longer believe in the virtue of hard work, honesty and merit.
2. The interplay of Politics. This is when politics comes into the realm of bureaucracy. The bureaucrat begins to bend the rules and jump protocols in order to achieve some political purposes. According to Ekekwe (1986), for the Nigerian governing class, development was synonymous with personal enrichment, and the use of state power for the process was theoretically and practically accepted by them. As a matter of fact, virtually all high offices in the land have been turned into avenues and means for personal enrichment.
3. The problem of ethnicity. Here bureaucratic rules are bent and some procedures jumped in order to achieve some parochial or sectional interests. This is common during personnel selection exercises, censuses, falsification of reports and the likes.
4. Poor rewards system and unfavourable socio-economic environment which usually leads to increase in the cost of living and a corresponding fall in the standard of living among the people. On the long run, the serving bureaucrats begin to engage in all forms of corrupt practices in order to make both ends meet (Lawal, 1995). According to Krueger (1974) and Ekekwe (1986) corruption necessarily exists in and is encouraged by, every capitalist economy, since, in such an economic system the drive and competition for private profit and capital accumulation are the motor. In such an economic system the profit - maximizing bureaucrat leaves no avenue unexplored and no stone unturned in the search for extra gains. Since those who pursue money and material things hardly acknowledge the existence of any rules or ethics except those that encourage their parochial interests, morality goes out the door when the profit/selfish interests enters.
5. There is the socio-cultural dimension of bureaucratic corruption. This arose from the pressures arising from the extended family where the bureaucrat exists for both the nuclear and the extended families. And as such little or nothing is left for the worker or the governing elite after taking care of his extended family. Traditionally and customarily people give 'Kola' as a form of incentive to others in the society. This has now been passed to bureaucratic settings thus leading to corruption. Coupled with this is the 'get - rich - attitude' of Nigerians and the strong commitment to materialism. This has inevitably made most of the serving bureaucrats to engage in corrupt practices.
6. Bureaucratic corruption flourishes and grows best in an atmosphere where people believe that the risk of discovery is low or virtually non-existent; or that even when discovered, the punishment is little or minimal or can even be evaded. For instance in Nigeria it is quite easy to 'settle' the law enforcement agents and thus escape prosecution.
7. Finally, bureaucratic corruption thrives where there is a high degree of centralization of political and economic decision - making in the hands of a few people. As a result of shortage of skilled personnel, responsibilities are not spread but decision - making becomes concentrated on a small group of individuals. Where people who want to beat the administrative bottleneck abound, this small group of bureaucrats become or make themselves target of corruption.

A cursory look at the identified causes of bureaucratic corruption shows that it is multidimensional and arising largely from societal values rather than singularly from individual dispositions. This notwithstanding, this paper looked at the problem of bureaucratic corruption from the two main perspectives in sociological discourse. These are the Micro-Macro perspectives. In the first perspective, that is the Micro perspective, bureaucratic corruption is seen as arising from individual dispositions. This follows the Weberian postulation that the subjective dimensions of behaviour is an intelligible part and crucial to our understanding of all social phenomena and conduct. In this sense,

the individual bureaucrat is seen as the 'creator' of his world, and he is therefore responsible for all the various forms of bureaucratic corruption that is observed. The argument is that an individual bureaucrat is expected to do an honest day's work without demanding, receiving or looking forward to any form of gratification or inducement as a precondition to performing official roles or duties. In situations where bureaucrats now demand for some kind of self-gratification before discharging their official responsibilities, then cases of corruption are established and arising from individual dispositions.

On the other hand, the Macro perspective views bureaucratic corruption as a social problem. According to Nobbs (1984) the structural-functionalists regard social problems as serious behavioural deviations hindering the functioning of society. Social problems are regarded as inhibiting the needs and goals of society and bureaucratic corruption could be so regarded. From this background, the widespread corruption in the Nigerian bureaucracies can be located within the existing social structure, norms and the value-system. If it is taken that a nation gets the kind of leaders it deserves, then by the same token, a nation also gets the kind of bureaucracies it deserves. If the Nigerian society at large is corrupt, then it is logical and not surprising that the Nigerian bureaucracies are corrupt too.

MANIFESTATIONS OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

The manifestation of corruption is multifaceted. Ekekwue (1986) describes a typical manifestation of corruption in the following:

"If an import licensing officer issues a licence to X either because X gave the officer some gift or because Y, who is an important political figure and X's patron, has pressed the officer to issue the licence regardless of the contravention of any regulation, corruption has taken place. Both the officer, if he issued the licence upon receipt or promise of receipt of some gain other than his/her usual salary, and X and Y have engaged in corruption."

In the hospitals, patients give bribes to the medical personnel, offenders bribe policemen and other law enforcement agents, to evade arrest and prosecution, heads of local governments, state governors and heads of parastatals award contracts to firms which give them Kickbacks (usually 10%

of the total value of the contract), politicians bribe electoral officials. The judiciary is not left out as there are widespread allegations of corruption among Nigerian judges. (Oloruntimehin, 1995).

There are several instances cited in Newspapers and magazines about judicial corruption. A notable instance, out of many, was the offering of 13 Mercedes Benz limousines by General Babangida as gifts to the justices of the Supreme Court (Sunday Sketch, January 29, 1995, pp. 8-9). In another instance, the Late General Abacha, in an address at the inauguration of the eight-man committee led by Justice Kayode Eso to probe the judiciary said:

The political crises which necessitated the re-entry of the military do not absolve the Nigerian judiciary. There are incontrovertible facts in support of this. (Sunday Concord January 30, 1994, p. A3.)

The inauguration of the probe panel and the recognition and acknowledgement by the government that the judiciary is corrupt is more or less an indication that the allegation is no longer a subject of debate or controversy. However, it is unfortunate that the report of the said probe panel was not made public up till this time.

According to Ekekwue (1986) the members of the governing class, while in search for more money for consumption and capital for investment, turn to illegal means for further accumulation and enrichment. Corruption takes place principally through the state apparatuses because it is through the state that most of the surplus appropriation and redistribution takes place in a nation. Ekekwue stated emphatically that opportunities for corruption abound within the state apparatuses which includes the bureaucracies. For example in the last military dispensation, there were shocking discoveries that many of the military administrators in connivance with some bureaucrats siphoned large sums of public funds into private accounts. In many instances contracts were hurriedly awarded without following the usual protocols. Moreover, hasty withdrawals from the treasury were reported. According to Akindele (1990), there were evidence of bureaucrats helping the political office holders to falsify accounts. What we are saying in essence is that most of the atrocities committed by the political office holders were done with the assistance of the bureaucrats. As many of them are corrupt, they become easily tools and comrade-in-crime for the political office

holders.

Going further, Ekekwe stated that opportunities for corruption are easily realized, most especially by the politicians and the bureaucrats who serve them. Because politics and politicians in Nigeria have been excessively corrupt, the bureaucrats and the bureaucracies that serve both have grown corruptible and corrupt. With little or no democratic influence from other social and political groups in the nation, Ekekwe (1986) argued that those who control and/or have access to the state bureaucracies could get away with almost anything. It is no exaggeration to say that they were the ones who usually made and interpret the laws. And this they always do to suit their whims and caprices. Thus it is to be observed that it is among the governing class - politicians, that corruption is most rampant. From there it spreads and begins to manifest in the other segments of a nation - the bureaucracies inclusive. In short, the Nigerian bureaucracies have matured and grown to a degree that corruption has become a permanent integral feature of the policy of the nation.

According to Okeke (1998) actors generally benefit from their bureaucratic transactions at the expense of the common good, but are properly shielded by the bureaucratic machinery from public accountability. Okeke in the same place argued that even though bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria has largely been a gendered affair and mostly associated with the men folk, the advent of the "First Lady Syndrome" led to women's incursion into bureaucratic corruption on a large scale in Nigeria. The office of the First Lady gives a group of women, whose credentials for the job rest on their position as wives to men in authority, the liberty to loot at will. This was the trend during the General Babangida era (1985-1993) when Maryam his wife came up with the Better Life for Rural Women programme. The BLRW programme was used at all the three tiers of government to siphon public funds into private coffers. The family support programme of the Abacha regime (1993-1998) did not fare better as there were widespread allegations of corruption in its activities.

SUGGESTED CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

In the light of the previous discussions the following categorical imperatives were suggested.

First, the nation needs a radical change in the value-system. Value system refers to the generally accepted ways of life of a people and it is sometimes conceived as the culture of a given people. Whether the nation is ready for such a radical change in the value-system is a different matter entirely. But the change is desirable and at the same time imperative. It is envisaged that a radical change in the value-system will definitely reduce the incidence of bureaucratic corruption. By and large, the war must begin with leadership by example from the very top. Again, there must be an unequivocally-stated policy of complete avoidance and discouragement of corrupt practices in the conduct of governmental affairs, by running a government that will engender transparency, accountability, and integrity; a government that will have zero-tolerance for corruption.

Secondly, the socio-economic conditions of the nation should be made more favourable for the masses in general. The cost of living is presently high while the standard of living has fallen drastically to unprecedented levels and the quality of life remains very poor. The standard of living in the nation needs to be improved to allow for self-fulfilment, productivity improvements and to boost morale. This can be done by offering the working and the governing classes equitable wages which will be commensurate with the cost and standard of living. This will inevitably reduce the urge to indulge in corrupt practices.

Poor remuneration and other motivational incentives by government for public servants have been for a long time one of the popular arguments for the various corrupt practices in the Nigerian bureaucracies. The condition became worse in the last fifteen years or so as a result of the introduction of unfriendly Public Policies/Programmes, like Structural Adjustment Programme, among others embarked upon by the military. According to Ake (1993), people cannot continue to reproduce themselves at the level of poverty without doing something to help themselves in order to survive. This problem of poor remuneration has been solved to an extent under the present (Obasanjo) administration by increasing the minimum wage to ₦7,500.00. This is the third year running and the persistent fall in the value of domestic currency accompanied by inflation continue to reduce worker's purchasing power and if care is not taken the workers may be demotivated again and resort to corrupt practices. In essence, the government of

Nigeria should formulate a wage policy that is strictly attached to changes in the level of inflation and not tying wage increase to scoring cheap political points.

There is the ideological dimension of the discussions. From all indications, bureaucratic corruptions seems to be more prominent in capitalist nations than in socialist ones. This is because capitalism encourages an unjust distribution of wealth and resources - and thus the main source of inequalities in a nation. Capitalism makes a society a scene of 'survival of the fittest', a situation of one man against all other men. In an attempt to survive, every other man grabs whatever he can find and devices all means to survive whether legal or illegal ones. From this background, it is therefore suggested that the adoption of 'socialism' could also be an answer to bureaucratic corruption. In socialism, the urge to be corrupt is lower than that of capitalism. This is because socialism is an economic system characterised by the public ownership of the means of production, central planning, and distribution of goods without a profit motive in order to achieve an egalitarian social community. The goal is to produce goods for the general welfare and to distribute them according to people's needs, not their ability to pay. The logic is that if the bureaucrat is well taken care of by the state, then the urge to indulge in corrupt practice diminishes. Therefore socialism, from all indications, could be an antidote to bureaucratic corruption.

Also, it is suggested that all erring corrupt bureaucrats should be dealt with severely and made to face the law so as to serve as deterrence to others. In addition, all their ill-gotten wealth and properties be confiscated by the state.

The establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission by the present democratic regime, backed by the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act 2000, is a step in the right direction. However, it is important to reiterate the fact that such similar agencies have been established in the past but they failed to achieve what they were mandated to do. For the newly established commission to perform all the investigative and prosecutorial functions allocated to it by the said Act effectively, its operations and activities must not be politicised. The commission may also need to work hand-in-hand with the Code of Conduct Bureau to facilitate both its efficiency and effectiveness. It is clear

that the commission is more or less nothing but a toothless bulldog as it has not achieved much in its two-year operations. Rather the commission has been used as a political tool to harass opponents, most especially governors from parties other than the ruling party.

As a corollary, there should be considerable reduction of regulations and other bureaucratic bottlenecks to reduce opportunities for the giving or demanding of bribes in the bureaucracies. There should be more openness and less secrecy; more streamlining of approval processes and less of licensing procedures.

Finally, the establishment of a 'National Ethics Commission' was suggested. It is envisaged that the mentality of the citizens could be re-orientated through such a commission. This commission should be saddled with the responsibility of enlightening, re-educating, re-socializing the people about the desired or approved moral behaviour, character, conduct and values. The people also need to be regularly reminded of the fact that honesty is a noble virtue. Slogans on these teachings could be run in the local dialects of the various ethnic nationalities on Radio and Television advertisements, in Newspapers and Magazines. It is in the recognition of this imperative that the present civilian regime launched a programme titled "National Rebirth" to mark the country's 39th independence anniversary in October 1999. This is with the belief that social development and progress need to be backed up by a solid moral foundation and that this requires more than the provision of social infrastructures and campaigns on the pages of newspapers. This calls for a holistic approach and all segments of the society must be involved and carried along.

CONCLUSION

To say that bureaucratic corruption remains widespread in Nigeria and that it portends evil for the nation is no longer a subject of debate. Rather the debate is usually about the causes of bureaucratic corruption and what can be done to curtail it. This is exactly the focus of this paper. From all indications, it is clear that corruption in whatever form it takes is not in any way desirable. It is the single most debilitating factor that has stalled the progress, growth and development of this nation. In the light of this, we suggest some

categorical imperatives that may be adopted to deal decisively with this undesirable phenomenon.

Our final thesis is that if the suggested categorical imperatives are sincerely implemented, the incidence of corruption in our bureaucracies, without being too optimistic, will be reduced to the minimum. We however want to caution that the success or the effectiveness of the suggested imperatives depends largely on the conditionalities attached to each of these suggestions.

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