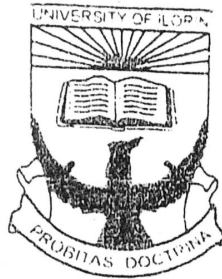


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Civil Service Ethics and Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

Over the years, several efforts made by Nigeria to improve the performance of its civil service for national development and to overcome its current economic crisis appear to be fruitless. This is partly due to the increasing unethical behaviour among civil servants. Although corruption is an endemic phenomenon in Nigeria, this paper focuses on the manifestations of corruption and moral decadence among civil servants which are against administrative ethical norms and which this paper concludes, tends to destroy trust, confidence and political stability in Nigeria.

Introduction

The civil service of any country is usually the machinery used by government to formulate and execute public policies to serve public interest and promote national development. Civil servants are therefore important instruments needed to ensure a stable and efficient administrative system. They should therefore conform to certain administrative ethical norms such as integrity, honesty, probity, and political neutrality, in order to make the civil service efficient and effective in the discharge of its duties to the nation. Ethics and accountability are critical for administrative systems because they underline the legitimacy of the government itself (ECA/AAPAS, 1991).

The Nigerian civil service does not seem to have improved in its performance over the years inspite of the numerous administrative reforms which were directed towards that end. This is partly because these reforms focused on transforming the structure and the competence of the civil service without paying adequate attention to the need to inculcate proper attitudes in both the civil servants and the political executives. This has given rise to corruption and other unethical behaviour among civil servants. The entrenchment and perpetration of corruption in the Nigerian civil service is no longer a secret. Rules, regulations and agencies instituted by government to raise the standard of ethical behaviour among civil servants seem to be either inadequate or ineffective to a large extent. It is however important to note that corruption is an endemic phenomenon in Nigeria. In other words, the whole society should be held responsible for this vice.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to establish the fact that corruption and other unethical behaviour have been entrenched in the Nigerian civil service and to examine the danger it poses for the country's economic recovery and national development in view of the strategic position of the civil service in national development. This will be done by looking at the meaning of corruption, its manifestations and causes in the country. Suggestions will also be offered appropriately.

The concepts of corruption and ethics

Corruption

It is not easy to offer a precise definition of corruption. This is because there is little agreement about what corruption encompasses. Different people have viewed and described it differently. In fact, Lippman (1930) concluded that it is not only difficult to define corruption, it is even "impossible" to study corruption. What is easier to do is to expose corruption. According to Nye (1967) some scholars such as Mandevil and others have identified certain "benefits" that could be derived from corrupt practices in any given society. According to them, "private vice by

the dexterous management of a skillful politician may be turned into public benefits. However, it is generally accepted that corruption is a social vice that could lead to the destruction of society (Rejathnana, 1970). Indeed, Ayo (1986) has argued that in Nigeria, corruption is considered as a social vice which reduces government effectiveness.

Corruption, in one form or another exists in all countries of the world both in public and private lives. What constitutes corruption vary among individuals and societies. For instance, Peters and Welch (1978) hold the view that an action is deemed corrupt depending on societal perception of corruption. However, there is a common meaning usually attached to corruption – it usually carries a negative connotation or an indication of undesirable or immoral behaviour. Most definitions of corruption agree that corruption is the use of public office with its paraphernalia of prestige, influence and power, in order to make private gains, which need not be monetary in breach of laws and regulations nominally in force. (Ekhomu, 1980).

In this paper, we perceive corruption as any violation or departure from administrative ethical norms usually spelt out in various government documents such as the General Order, Financial Instructions, Decrees, and the Constitution of the country among others. This is why we agree with the contention that corruption is the sacrifice of public for personal benefits (Ekpo, 1979).

Ethics

All organizations and professional bodies usually set out certain ethical or mode of behaviour of their members. In other words, Ethics are the rules or standard governing the moral conduct of the members of an organisation or management profession. Ethics is therefore defined in moral philosophy as "that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct with respect to rightness or wrongness of certain actions, and to the goodness or badness of the motives and ends of such actions. (Chandler and Plano, 1988). The administrative ethics of Nigerian civil service includes integrity, honesty, probity and political neutrality on the part of the civil servants in the conduct of government business. This is to ensure that the actions and behaviour of civil servants are in line with the accepted standard of morality and accountability.

Corruption in the Nigerian civil service

Corruption is a daily practice in Nigeria as it is in all other human societies. It is present in all its social institutions and local government inclusive (Ayo, 1986). However, our concern in this paper is to examine corruption in the Nigerian civil service in view of its strategic position in the formulation and execution of public policies and the fact that civil servants usually have access to government financial resources. The civil service of any nation is usually composed of the Ministries and Departments of government and the bureaucrats and professionals who work in them. It is the major instrument used by government to implement its policies. The importance of the civil service is such that even other bodies (such as the military and the parastatals) which are also used to implement specific aspects of government policies are themselves guided and controlled through the civil service. Moreover, as the primary and primate instrument of government, the performance of the civil service can be ignored only at the peril of the country and the government of the day (Phillips, 1992).

After independence, allegations of corruption or unethical practices in the public service were always laid at the doorstep of political executives. There was the belief among Nigerians then that Nigerian politicians were very corrupt. In fact, by the end of the Second Republic, politicians in the country were seen as being responsible for constantly looting the nation's treasury.

On the other hand, civil servants were regarded as being innocent since they were seen as merely carrying out the policies made by the political executives. However, it has been observed that the spectre of corruption among the politicians which has also found its way into the civil service and became a matter of concern when the military took over political leadership in 1966. The evidence of pre-1966 corruption was highlighted by the 1966 coup de-tats leaders. The politicians were more concerned with complimenting the political power they inherited with economic power. Consequently, the civil service became the "conduit pipe through which public funds were diverted to private hands" (Omoruyi, 1991).

However, it later became clear that civil servants have increasingly been involved in policy making, policy implementation and evaluation rather than merely carrying out governmental policies particularly since the military took over power from politicians. In other words, they took part in determining who got what, when and how. It will therefore be unfair to hold only politicians responsible for the ills of this country (Ekpenyong, 1990). In fact, having discredited the civilian politicians for failing to fulfil the task of securing national unity, political stability and socio-economic development of the country, the military incorporated civil servants into government as top federal bureaucrats became members of the Federal Executive Council along with their Commissioners (Olugbemi, 1979). Thus, the Civil service gained ascendancy as a potent social force in the administration of the country leading to the era of the emergence of super-permanent secretaries until the take over by another military government.

The Military and corruption in Nigeria

The Murtala/Obasanjo military government held the civil service responsible for the drift and indecision of the latter years of the Gowon administration. Consequently, it carried out a major purge of the civil service and barred the permanent secretaries from attending Executive Council meetings.

However, the Babangida regime witnessed looting of government fund and property, and the acceleration and even "legalization" of corrupt practices following the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme and the pretentious political transition programme of the Babangida administration between 1985 and 1993 (Tagowa, 1997).

The Babangida military regime later came under intense searchlight of the Abacha military regime that succeeded it. The regime embarked on what it called a corrective and anti-corruption crusade. The crusade, according to the government was aimed at cleansing society of indiscipline and entrenching probity, accountability and efficient management. The subsequent probing of several "sick" and "corrupt" government agencies such as the Nigerian Ports Authority, Nigeria Telecommunication Limited, Nigeria Airports Authority, among others revealed that between September 1988 and 30th June, 1994 a total of \$124 billion including the proceeds from the (Gulf War Windfall) was:

... spent on what could neither be adjudged as genuine high priority nor truly regenerative investment. Neither the president nor the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria accounted to anyone of these massive, and extra-budgetary expenditures (Okigbo Panel Report, 1995).

The so-called corrective regime, immediately after assumption of office, appointed military officers to take over the administration of state governments, pending the appointment of substantive administrators. Surprisingly, within three weeks of their appointments they became deeply corrupt. The probe panel that investigated this reported that five of the military

administrators were found guilty of misappropriating large sums of public funds (The Punch, February 23, 1994). The Abdulsalam Abubakar military regime that came after Abacha soon retrieved a total of ₦63.25 million from the Abacha family, money looted from the treasury (The Week, November 30, 1998). In another report, Abacha was confirmed to have made away with over £3.6 billion in his five years reign (Nigerian Tribune, 6 July, 1998).

In view of its structural and ideological weakness, the military exploited the situation of their administration to deflate the power of the political class in favour of the civil service thereby making the civil service a reliable ally in corrupt practices. Indeed, the military government of Babangida accused the civil service of corruption. For example, Federal Ministry of Information and Culture under Babangida's administration declared that:

There was everywhere a sharp increase in corruption in government with regards to the spending of public funds. For instance, bribes were given and taken in an orgy of payment of mobilization fees in the millions for government contracts which were not meant to be fulfilled. There was also a multiplication of ghost workers on the pay rolls of many government ministries and parastatals. (Federal Ministry of Information, 1989)

It, therefore, seems that there is no argument as to whether there is corruption in the Nigerian civil service or not. This is in spite of the various measures introduced by government to reduce or eliminate corruption and other unethical behaviour in the civil service. These measures include the establishment of anti-corruption agencies, anti-corruption campaign programmes, and legislation to prevent corruption practices in the civil service. These are:-

- (i) The Public Complaints Commission established in 1975 to investigate all complaints in respect of all administrative action by officers of public agencies considered by citizens as contrary to law or regulation, arbitrary, unfair, oppressive or improper.
- (ii) The Code of Conduct Bureau under the Presidency whose aims and objectives are to establish and maintain a high standard of morality in the conduct of government business and to ensure that the actions and behaviour of public officers conform to the highest standards of public morality and accountability. The Code of Conduct Bureau is also empowered to scrutinize the declaration of assets by public officials in respect of their conduct in public office.
- (iii) The Code of Conduct Commission is responsible for adjudication of issues emanating from the Code of Conduct Bureau with possibility of appeal to federal, state and local government, their agencies and members of the armed forces are covered by this code.
- (iv) The Public Accounts Committee was empowered by both the 1979 and 1989 Constitutions to prevent and expose corruption, inefficiency or waste in the execution or administration of laws or in the disbursement or administration of funds approved by the legislature. The Auditor General of the Federation is to assist the Committee by rendering annual reports and comments on the annual accounts of the government.

- (v) Media campaigns against corruption such as the Ethical Revolution Campaign (1973-1983); War Against Indiscipline (1984-1985); Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Recovery later National Orientation Agency.
- (vi) Tribunals such as the Code of Conduct Bureau Tribunal, and the 1993/1994 Parastatals Probe Panels. In addition to these measures, there was the purge of the public service in 1975 during which about 10,000 public officers were dismissed or retired on alleged inefficiency, old age, declining productivity and doubtful probity.

The measures above have since proved inadequate or ineffective to reduce or deter corruption and other unethical practices in the civil service. No wonder it was concluded that corruption in the Nigerian civil service is an old phenomenon which has increased so much and that it has rendered the civil service unproductive to a large extent (Kyari, 1990). It has been observed that in the Nigerian civil service of today, corruption is so pervasive and deeply entrenched that we should have long ago declared it a national disaster.

Causes and consequences of corruption in the Nigerian civil service

A number of factors are responsible for the entrenchment and perpetration of corruption in the Nigerian civil service. First, although, we have earlier argued that the political executives should not be held as the sole culprit in the perpetration of corrupt practices in Nigeria, it is however clear that the spread of corruption among the civil servants in Nigeria has to do with its predominance among political elite. This is because, in situations where the politician's ethical behaviour is not beyond reproach, it would be hard to expect the bureaucrats to act otherwise. The root of corruption is political because "politics in most African states are based on patron-client relationships" (ECA/AAPAS, 1991). This is particularly true in the Nigerian situation where the top echelon of the civil service was officially politicized by government under the 1988 civil service reforms.

Another major cause of corruption in the Nigerian civil service is scarcity. Where certain categories of public service are scarce, or there is the existence of bottlenecks or organizations queuing, there is the tendency for corruption (ECA/AAPAS, 1991). Where there is great difficulty in obtaining services in Passport Offices, licencing authorities etc. there is bound to be the existence of unethical behaviour in forms of giving and taking bribes in order to secure such services. For instance, during the Second Republic in Nigeria (1983-1985), there was the phenomenon of import licences racket which grew out of the bottlenecks created by the prohibition of any importation without official licence, whereas the licence was not easy to obtain. Poverty can also be identified as one important source of corruption. Poverty has become more pronounced with the emergence of the economic depression which has intensified the effort for personal survival at the expense of upholding official norms. As a result of high inflation, the salary and allowances of civil servants have become grossly inadequate to meet their personal needs. The devaluation of the country's currency vis-à-vis other currencies is also a contributing factor to the poor financial conditions of most civil servants. This situation has lured many civil servants to join the bandwagon of bribe takers in the service. The poorer a person is, the greater the pressure to yield to the temptation of corruption or other unethical behaviour.

Greed and avarice also constitute another source of corruption among civil servants in Nigeria. These are human vices, which may exist regardless of the quality of national leadership, or whether there is scarcity or not. This has to do with the criminal tendencies inherent in individuals particularly those who desire to look for more money at all costs.

The above factors, among others, have greatly contributed to the entrenchment and perpetration of corruption in the Nigerian civil service with grave consequences to the service and national development. Corruption and other unethical behaviour can be seen as the cancer that eats into the heart of our societies particularly in public life. It has triggered certain component of economic crisis, which in turn intensified unethical behaviour. Thus, the economic crisis that has gripped Africa is in some respect, both a cause and consequence of increased unethical practices (ECA/AAPAS, 1991).

Another major consequence of corruption is that it reduces the capacity of the civil service to provide goods and services for the benefit of the public it is designed to serve. With such a high degree of bribery, fraud, corruption and embezzlement of public funds in the ministries, it had become almost impossible to establish any new government projects or enterprises on a sound footing (Federal Ministry of Information, 1989). For instance, a number of government projects have been abandoned or completed. It has been observed that:

Various projects of high economic and social values, worth billions of naira lie fallow. Rotting, rusting and crumbling under rain and shine are abandoned hospital, clinics, markets, dams, airports, office blocks, housing projects, school building, factories, libraries, theatre complexes, hotels, hi-tech equipment (Newswatch, May 10, 1989).

Moreover, corruption creates a situation of potential political instability by destroying trust and confidence, which is the foundation for political stability. The leaders' preoccupation with serving sectional interests magnifies divisions within the society and this leads to a loss of respect for authority and laws; to a further enhancement of executive power making peaceful change of leadership impossible (ECA/AAPAS, 1991). Corruption in the Nigerian civil service has great consequences on the efforts of the government to solve the political and economic problems facing it in recent years.

Similarly, it has been noted that corruption in the Nigerian civil service has constantly reduced government effectiveness by undermining the legitimacy of public authority, generating political instability and violence. Corruption has led to the absence of a sense of mission of professionalism and monumental distrust among public servants (Olowu, 1985).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of corruption, with particular reference to its existence in public life. We have also looked at the causes of corruption in the Nigerian civil service. We have shown that corruption has become all pervading, unabashed, uncontrolled, and persistent in the Nigerian civil service. From whatever perspective one may view it, corruption is a deadly disease in an organization. Political instability, ineffectiveness of the services to deliver goods and services, inability to achieve economic recovery lack of trust and confidence among others, have been identified as the major consequences of corruption, immorality and weak accountability among civil servants. While we are not trying to make Angels out of civil servants, or expecting them to behave as if they are a special breed of Nigerians, we hold the view that corruption in the Nigerian public sector and particularly in the civil service must be reduced as much as possible if not totally stopped in view of its consequences for national development.

In view of the cancerous effects of corruption on the Nigerian civil service and the nation itself, it is suggested that the various government anti-corruption Agencies, Laws, Tribunals and

campaigns should be re-organized to be more effective to check corruption in the civil service. This is why we suggest that the government pursues with vigour, its plan to make the Code of Conduct Bureau more effective to "establish and maintain a high standard of morality in the conduct of government business and to ensure that the actions and behaviour of public officers conform to the highest standards of public morality and accountability. We also suggest that the principle of reward and punishment should be introduced to the issue of probity in the civil service.

The government should embark on sound welfare programmes in order to cushion the effects of the harsh economic condition of the country. This will reduce the burden on civil servants and hence check corrupt practices in the service. Other suggestions such as the need to train civil servants in personal ethical practices, setting up of anti-corruption leagues or watch dogs etc. have been offered by writers on corruption in addition to those highlighted above.

It should be noted that the remedies against corruption mentioned above are not totally new in the Nigerian civil service. The problem, however, has been that the application and monitoring of these measures have been done with laxity, without sincerity of purpose, and lack of political will on the part of the government that should make the members of these Anti-corruption Agencies work to achieve their aims. There should therefore be leadership by example among the leaders both in the government and in the civil service. This is why we agree with the contention that "no lasting solution can be proposed without focusing on the quality of political leadership. In a situation of a general malaise of indiscipline and low national consciousness, change must be initiated through a strong, responsible, knowledgeable and dedicated leadership (Olowu, 1985).

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