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Corruption and the Problem of National Sustainable Development: A Socio-Religious Approach

Johnson-Bashua, Adepeju Olufemi, PhD

Abstract

The menace of corruption has become endemic in the socio-economic and political life of many African countries, including Nigeria. It appears that there is a degree of moral bankruptcy in the character of many Nigerians both home and abroad. This has significantly affected the reputation of Nigeria in the international community, as well as contributed to the ruins of Nigeria's economy. In spite of all meaningful attempts at curbing this pervasive malaise, corruption has become unabated within the Nigerian state. This has impeded growth and growth and hindered Nigeria from attaining its sustainable development goals. Apart from corruption, Nigeria is also popular for its people's fanaticism with religion. It is therefore intriguing how to juxtapose the endemic corruption with the deep rooted fanaticism in religion. This paper seeks to primarily examine how Nigerians can take up the challenge and responsibility posed by their faiths in reshaping the nature of the pervasive corruption. The findings of the research indicate that the religious principles of the three popular religions in Nigeria have provided valuable teachings upon which a sound human society can be built. The actualization of these creeds in the minds and attitude of the people can be the much-needed antidotes for combating corruption. The methodology adopted by the paper is theological and comparative with the use of secondary sources such as books, journals and internet sources.

Keywords: *Religion, antidote, corruption, Nigeria, comparative*

Introduction

The malaise of corruption in the Nigerian state is generally regarded as endemic and pervasive. This is basically because corruption seems to have taken root in all segments of the Nigerian society. There is hardly a sector that is not befuddled with corruption. One can perceive this at all levels of governance, the security agencies, the civil service, educational sector to mention a few. Corruption, whether in the public or private sector, symbolizes an abuse of institutional trust for private gains. The resultant effect is an impediment to progress and sustainable development. Nigeria that has often been rated as the giant of Africa is now regarded as one of the poorest nations in Africa (Shaw, 1984:393-405) because of the corrosive effect of corruption, which has made the dividend of democracy a mirage for the people. In 2018,

Nigeria ranked 144 least corrupt nation out of 175 countries promulgated by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2018). The corruption perceptions index indicates the outrageous occurrences of an aggravated situation which looms largely on money laundering, bribery, tax evasion, forgery and perjury, aiding and abetting, ghost workers payroll, ghost contract award, nepotism, electoral malpractices, embezzlement and others.

In spite of the notorious level of prevalent corruption in the country, Nigeria is popularly rated as one of the most religious countries in the world (Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project, 2011). The near fanatical practice of religion in the country vis-à-vis the high level of corruption is an irreconcilable phenomenon leaving many in doubt of the religious sincerity of Nigerians. Three popular religions are largely practiced in Nigeria namely: African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity. In almost every nook and corner of Nigeria, there are large numbers of churches and mosques with great numbers of worshippers; many of whom are paradoxically elected officials of governmental, civil and public servants, private individuals and others riddled with corruption practices of all kinds. However, the basic tenets of the three recognized religions in Nigeria teach and demand moral expectations from their adherents in a way that would naturally discourage and prohibit all forms of corruption.

The paper seeks to answer the question as to why there is so much religiosity in the midst of ardent corruption and the stance of the three popular religions in Nigeria on corruption. It also tries to discuss how Nigerians can take up the challenge and responsibility posed by their faiths to bring about attitudinal changes. The paper establishes that the responsibility of attaining this feat lies with the spiritual leaders and their followers in close connection with the government in an attempt to eliminate corruption. This would result in building an enduring and valuable societal system for posterity.

Theoretical Framework

Corruption is a serious global issue, and one of the greatest problems plaguing the African continent. It is retarding Africa's human and economic developments (Lawal, 2007:1-7). In Nigeria today, corruption has damaged development objectives, undermined long term economic growth and increased poverty. This has resulted in both physical and psychological suffering for the masses. The dismal performance of political leaders in providing the dividends of democracy to the people is largely due to indiscipline and corruption (Lim, 2017:3-4). The deplorable economic and social conditions have increased the growing entry of Nigerians into the international labour market and the passion to live abroad. This has become imperative since there

seems to be no access to good employment or credit facilities to start a business nor is there hope of living a descent and fulfilling life. The prevailing inequality in the social system has dampened the morale of many Nigerians. The documented massive looting and siphoning of Nigerian resources by political leaders seems to be greatly responsible for the deplorable economic and social conditions of Nigerians (Ubi & Udah, 2014:1708-1722). The lifestyle of many public officers is characterized by ostentatious living, corruption scandals which are never probed, lack of commitment to public service, fat monthly salaries for doing practically nothing and the accumulation of properties both at home and abroad, to mention a few. It appears that the political class is interested in 'privatizing' the country's resources into private pockets rather than the interest of the public.

The effect of the corruption in the desire to amass wealth at all cost seems to have made it desirous for youths in Nigeria to develop the get-rich-quick at all cost syndrome. This has alienated many from what is truly good and transcendental. Many people now pursue pleasure in place of happiness, and happiness is now seen in the context of wealth. This makes many to trivialize corruption as a lesser evil and a means of survival in a hostile environment. With the high level of corruption for which Nigerians are notoriously recognized coupled with their popularity for ostentatious lifestyle, it is difficult for many to correlate this with their near fanatical religiosity. It is believed that religious teachings should remarkably influence the lives of the practitioners to the path of salvation.

Clearly, there seems to be no justification for Nigeria to be noted to be notoriously corrupt in the face of its fanatical religiosity. The sentiment about get-rich-quick also seems to drift the message about salvation to that of prosperity. It is due to this drift that this paper examines the widespread and endemic nature of corruption in all aspects of life in Nigeria. This paper is concerned about examining the moral doctrines implicit within the various religious principles that are meant to serve as formidable remedy to fighting corruption.

Nigerian State and Corruption

Corruption is presently one of the major challenges facing the human race and it is fast becoming a threat to human existence. The dynamics of endogenous corruption in African countries can be described as a 'crime against humanity' (Ilias, 2006:466-486). Africa is confronted with serious corruption challenges due to lack of transparency and accountability. This culture breeds corruption, dishonesty and builds a society based on relationships of patronage thus eroding the norms, values and practices of true democracy.

The spate of underdevelopment and abject poverty bedeviling African countries attest to the fact that African leaders lack the political will to lead by example. In Nigeria for example, corruption has been identified as the main obstacle to the realization of good governance, and sustainable development (Transparency International, 2005). The pattern of Nigerian corruption suggests a trend of progressive increase from one historical epoch to another. It is characterized by bribery, embezzlement, money laundering, electoral malpractice, looting of the treasury, ghost contract award, and so on. These atrocities have weakened the capacity of the state to deliver effective services equally and undermined the credibility of the democratic system. The numerous political conflicts in many parts of the country can be attributed to corruption. Indeed, the recent demand for 'revolution' by a political activist, Omoyele Sowore and the Oduduwa Republic agitators demanding the breakup of Nigeria have been conveyed in the name of poor governance and corruption (Ogundipe, 2019). It is a demand for democratic freedom to express political disgust and ultimately throw out of injustice and despotic leadership encrusted with corruption. It is through the denial of liberties and freedoms that political leaders carry out corruption and crony capitalism without much regard to the objection by the rest of the citizenry

There is no doubt that the overall justification for a people coming together under a state and surrendering their sovereignty to government is to ensure an enabling environment for justice, equity and the welfare of the citizenry (Rufus & Eyo, 2017:35-41). Therefore, any government that does not provide these basic needs is devoid of good governance. Good governance naturally presupposes transparency and accountability grounded and nurtured by innate and enduring moral standard which should exclude corruption of any kind at whatever level. The Nigerian state is not only guilty of bad governance but also of retarded economic development through corrupt activities that discourage investors and well-meaning collaborators both locally and internationally (Berman & Leys, 1994:1). Corruption has also created unsuitable social environment for talented Nigerians, making them seek greener pastures abroad and other African countries like South Africa resulting in brain drain (IOM, 2017:9-10). This has further compounded the dearth of human resources making the country heavily dependent on foreign 'specialists' who are paid exorbitant amounts for services which can be rendered by the locals. This makes it impossible for government to implement effective development strategies of their own (Robinson, 1998:253-254).

Some of the identifiable causes of corruption in Nigeria include greed and selfishness, poor leadership, weak ethical values, negative colonial legacy, weak judicial system, political instability and so on. There is a general

belief that the center-nexus of corruption in Nigeria is located in the political sector (Akpator, 2003:355). The deep-seated governance style of Nigerian leaders gave birth to the many corrupt practices which have become a tradition. For the larger part of the life-span of Nigeria, the military dominated governance through coup d'état starting with the 1966 coup led by Nzeogwu (*Siollun, 2009:27-30*). Since then, Nigerian leaders preoccupied themselves with 'politics of survival', using military coups or election rigging to consolidate power which guaranteed them security of tenure. The military ruled Nigeria for a total of 29 years which only succeeded in perpetuating neo-colonialism, exploitation of the people and resentment of any dissenting voices (Falola & Genova, 2009:262-263). During this period, ethnicity and nepotism became key factors in political appointments and allocation of national resources. With so much power at their disposal, individuals in high offices in both the public and private sectors used their power and influence to amass wealth to the detriment of national interest. Consequently, this entrenched the culture of corruption, impunity and profound poverty.

With the institution of civilian rule particularly from 1999, the three arms of governance have become largely distinctive to the extent that roles and performance or non-performance of each arm, the executive, the judiciary and the legislative can be clearly isolated and evaluated. (Wilson, 2013:136–143). Consequently, to depose that there is a Nigerian state is to submit to the conviction that all governmental apparatus from forming political parties, conducting elections, appointing ministers or commissioners to running the civil service and other parastatals of government including the military the judiciary and legislature are to be regarded as culminating in good governance. It is when the sum total of corrupt practices at these various levels are considered that one concludes that corruption is celebrated as a fundamental ingredient of governance. In the election process which is the point of call in kick-starting governance, there is the use of money to influence and win elections. The formation of parties is usually hijacked by money-bag politicians who spend huge sums of money in bribing election officials to rig elections in their favor and inducing voters to sell their votes. Thus money is used to injuriously affect the elective franchise of the electorate (Adamu et al, 2016:89–99). It is usually from this process that godfatherism in politics emerges. The godfather after spending so much money expects to reap back what he has invested in his candidates through financial looting of the treasury.

At the executive arm of governance, there are series of reported cases of corruption among federal, state and local government officials. This is manifested in embezzlement, inflation of contracts and demand for bribe before performing official functions or awarding of contracts. The funds loot-

ed are usually siphoned overseas and the beneficiaries and their benefactors often indulge in all forms of opulent living while the masses watch helplessly. These government officials glorify themselves in wantonness, in clear violation of the trust and confidence reposed in them as custodians of these funds which they ought to discharge with high level of morality and decency. There are many reports by reputable magazines of the fortunes of public office holders and heads of state stored abroad. An example is the French Weekly which published the fortunes of some African heads of state including the Late General Sanni Abacha (Ayittey, 2002:1-7.).

The judiciary on its part has not been immune from the allegation of corruption bothering on bribery to fix judgments (Campbell, 2018). The Nigerian 1993 General Elections and the role played by Justice Italkpeme in delivering midnight judgment is still fresh in the memory of Nigerians (The Washington Post, 1993). For the legislative arm of government, corruption has become a tradition which is symbolized in the Ghana-must-go syndrome. The average Nigerian believes that these legislative houses particularly the Senate and House of Representatives are citadels of corruption rather than of law making and neither are they fulfilling their duty as the watch dog of the executive arm of government (Dambatta, 2016). Other forms of practices within governance are those perpetuated in the civil service and agencies of government at all levels. These are succinctly expressed in the words of Ukpogon:

Government contracts are highly inflated, bribes are taken from contractors before their applications are processed and a percentage of the contract money commonly known as “cut back” is given as bribe to those responsible for awarding the contract. Policemen, soldiers, customs and immigration official abroad check points, airports and seaports openly ask for “tips” from travelers. Files do not move in government offices unless those in charge of them are tipped. A job seeker has to pay bribe to be short-listed for the interview of a job he or she may never get (Ukpogon, 1998:1).

In the private sector, the high level of corruption has led to the demise of many banks and companies. The monopoly benefits to businesses given to government cronies and the commission fees demanded by officials and politicians have crippled the private sector. The illegal super-profits are often laundered through speculative, if legitimate, markets in real estate, stocks, entertainment businesses and so on. Honest business people are discouraged when faced by competitors who have access to large reserves of cheap funds. These effects undermine the sectors’ contribution to the economy and stifles development and poverty reduction. In summary, it is evident that there is

no sector of the Nigerian state that is not invested with the corruption disease. Arising from this situation, it is no surprise that the socio-moral behavior of Nigerians is adversely affected.

Religions, Governance and the Challenge of Corruption in Nigeria

Nigeria is declared as a secular state and this poses a problem for religion in the sense that it becomes difficult for religion to assume the role of being the national conscience, championing the course of national moral issues. Political leaders usually make use of the secular status of the country to silence religious leaders from pointing out the failures of government. They frequently loathe permitting what they call religious 'interference in politics'. However, the near fanatical way in which religion is practiced in Nigeria attest to the inseparable relationship between religion and state. This segment shall establish the inevitable link between religion and politics.

There are three main religions in Nigeria: African religion, Islam and Christianity. However, it appears that Christianity and Islam have more followership than African Traditional Religion. Thus in discussing religion and corruption in Nigeria, the adherents of these two religions constitute the overwhelming percentage of political, public and private people in different corrupt practices. It is important to state that these three religions place emphasis on morality as a determining ethical stands that should guide both the individual and state. Consequently, individual religions have quite different histories in their responses to social issues. For example, in African religion, moral values are offspring of religion. Thus morality is seen as "a way of life". This way of life is made up of principles which regulate attitudes, behavior and conducts of humans towards one another. These behaviors or attitudes are subsumed in the projected moral contents as truth, charity, kindness, honesty, chastity, loyalty and respect. It is also important to point out that for African religion, morality is not born out of a vacuum; its origin and custodianship are located within the domains of the Supreme Being, customs and traditions (Johnson-Bashua, 2020:255). It is the belief of many Nigerians that the relegation of the traditional religion and its strict moral standards is responsible for the state of corruption in the country (Aderibigbe & Johnson-Bashua, 2014:67-79). In many traditional African societies, there are rulers in form of kings, queens, chiefs or elders. These people are not just political heads, they also double as the mystical and religious head, the divine symbols of the people's sustenance. Their office is therefore the link between human rule and spiritual government (Aderibigbe & Johnson-Bashua, 2014:71).

In Africa, therefore, there is no dichotomy between politics and religion. Religious ideals are the norms of society by which its members are judged.

In Islam, the concept of morality also stipulates the relationship that should exist between man and God, man and his fellow men, and other creatures in the universe. Arising from these relationships is the possession of qualities which could be divided into two categories. First are those which enable man to abstain from inflicting injury upon his fellow men; and secondly, those which enable him to do well to others. Like African Traditional Religion, Islam imposes the virtue of chastity, honesty, patience, sympathy on Muslims. Islam as a religion has been very much linked to politics since its inception in 610. Prophet Muhammad established a community of believers (Ummah) who rallied behind him not solely for his military prestige but also for his prophethood (Hansen & Michael, 2002:267-279). The political community he founded based on the Constitution of Medina, also doubled as a religious society hinged on justice, equality and fair distribution of wealth and resources. For Muhammad, religion and politics coupled with military might blended together.

Christianity conveys a package of attitudes, behaviors and actions of men in the individual and group relations. This becomes functional in acts of purity, love, joy, patience and so on. All these culminate in the Christian golden rule of "love thy neighbor as thy self". Church leadership always speaks to the Church as well as for the church, helping to educate and sensitize the membership concerning the implications of Christian belief for a particular social issue. The relationship between church and state can be traced to the old testament. The prophets often acted as the finger of God challenging the state leaders whenever they departed from the will of God for the people of Israel. Jesus played this role successfully in the new testament. Several times he was at cross-roads with the Jewish authority until his death. Nigerians usually turn to the churches for direction and solutions. This is why Heads of State always seek support from religious leaders.

It is therefore not out of place to find compatibility of religion and politics in Nigeria since both are regarded as fundamental to the principles of governance. Indeed, religion has a leg in the tripod on which rests the spirit of governance; the others being morals and politics (Somerville, 2010). The custodianship of morality in religion makes the problem of corruption a challenge particularly with respect to Nigeria. It is difficult to correlate the cardinal teachings of justice, righteousness and human dignity central to these religions with the spate of corruption evident in the public and private circles. Churches and mosques abound in every nook and cranny of the country always packed full with worshippers especially on Fridays and Sundays,

yet the nation is notoriously corrupt. It's a shame that in Nigeria, many religious leaders avoid political and social issues affecting the country. They argue that their role is to pray and not to be involved in politics because to them politics is a dirty game. However, they are quick to preach 'prosperity sermons' which has further killed the morality of the people. Religious leaders have been accused of fueling corruption through crooked indoctrination (Eromosele & Ateba, 2013). They cannot claim to function well in the face of so much corruption. What this implies is failure on their part as God's messengers to guide the people aright. To check the moral bankruptcy of Nigerians, it is important that the moral dictates symbolized in these religions be enforced through new and improved dimension of teachings.

It is obvious that the solution to corruption is not in the hands of the government officials because they are the root cause of the epidemic. Religion still remains the formidable and result-oriented resource[s] for combating corruption. It is believed that religious tenet can provide the antidote for attitudinal change. This can be done in a number of ways, both at theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, religions should inculcate in their followers who occupy various positions both in governance and outside of it; those virtues which show not only the irreparable damage corruption does to both the individual and corporate existence in the nation but also it is condemnable to the Supreme Being who is the ultimate custodian of morality. It is therefore incumbent on religious leaders to establish a theoretical framework in their teachings that corruption is a sin against God and humanity. They must also teach their followers the irreconcilable contradictions in their way of life which negates the word of God and the fundamental moral virtues of their religion. For example, the life of Christ should be the model for a genuine Christian. This is succinctly expressed by Damon:

The story of Christ's life will always remain the one record in which the moral projection of man stands revealed in the root and its unity the hidden spring made palpably manifest by which the whole machine is moved . . . all lesser examples of lives will forever hold subordinate place and serve chiefly to reflect light in the control and original example. (Damon, 2010:231)

At the practical level, it has become a moral challenge for all three major religions in Nigeria to unite in the crusade for moral transformation of the Nigerian state. To start with, it must be realized that corruption may be an outcome of the poor economic condition of the people. Therefore, any meaningful attempt to transform the nation must take into cognizance the socio-economic situation. Thus, serious attention must be given to the improvement of the

economy and the living conditions of people. The particular moral challenge of all religious organizations in Nigeria is the mobilization of public conscience and opinion against acts of corruption at all levels. In achieving this, all religious leaders must add their voices to the protest against all forms of corruption. The traditionalists, the Christians and the Muslims in their different places of worship must confront and expose any kind of corruption as direct affront on the will of God. They must strive to guide their members towards Godliness, honesty, truth and dignity. The religious groups in Nigeria also have the responsibility to awake the moral consciousness of the political leaders in taking concrete steps at stamping out corruption.

Finally, it is imperative that religious leaders stand as examples in being above board over and against corruption. They must also encourage their members who are well known to be legitimately honest to partake in governance and other key sectors of the nation. It is only citizens imbued with high moral standard that can genuinely work out the socio-economic and political development that will ensure the survival of the country through elimination of corruption in the system. Thus, it is when religion is taken into politics and politics out of religion that we can have a clean and healthy Nigerian state.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that corruption is the bane of national growth and development. The systemic nature of corruption in Nigeria contributes to the incessant violence in the country, and compounds the structural inequality within the polity. Consequently, actions to tackle the effects of corrupt practices require urgent and sustained multi-faceted approach. Religion is one of those approaches with its inherent obligations to re-build the nation through the development of moral character. This must be done based on the principles of righteousness, justice and peaceful coexistence. These principles cannot be found in an outward show of religiosity that is the characteristic of the religions under focus. The reason is simply because religion as the conscience of society must guide political leaders to the right path. Religious leaders must take up the responsibility of reawakening the moral consciousness of the people, especially the political leaders. This must be done by revisiting the moral persuasions upon which these religions are built. It is with such contributions that religion can gain enough respect in dealing with complexities of the secular world.

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