ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: 
THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF CORRUPTION AND CLEANUPS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
In light of its pervasiveness, tackling corruption has become a priority on the Nigerian political agenda at local and national levels. This article critically examines the evolution of corruption in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous and oil-rich country. Specifically, the article examines how the corrupt practices of Nigeria’s ruling cabal have stunted the growth of a country with huge potential. The article contributes to the existing body of literature on corruption by explaining when, how and why corruption became entrenched in the Nigerian polity. In conclusion the article makes some prospective recommendations that may advance the anti-corruption campaign in Nigeria.

Keywords: corruption, political culture, economic growth, Nigeria

1. Introduction

In contemporary times, corruption is unarguably the greatest obstacle to social and economic development writ large. At the economic level, corruption is blamed for encouraging waste, promoting resource distribution asymmetries, distorting markets and competition, producing revenue losses, decelerating investment opportunities, privileging nonproductive rent-seeking activities, and fuelling distortions in economic policy. In the social sphere, corruption stemming from interethnic rivalry and aimed at the control of the state machinery for private or sectarian interests is said to be at the root of pervasive social conflicts. In the political arena, corruption is seen as undermining the capacity of the state and its institutions to function properly and to deliver public goods and services to its

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citizens.\textsuperscript{4} Corruption is also thought to undermine the electoral process while eroding trust and legitimacy in the polity.\textsuperscript{5}

Given the apparent pervasiveness of corruption in different regions of the world, it has come to occupy a frontline position on the local and global agenda. While no region, and hardly any country, is immune from corruption, some countries are more susceptible than others, and may suffer more negative effects.\textsuperscript{6} In Nigeria, corruption features prominently in the discourses of the deepening crisis and contradictions of the postcolonial state.\textsuperscript{7} The level of attention devoted to the topic may not only be due to its rapid and unprecedented expansion to all facets of human endeavour and its menacing social and economic ramifications, but also because of the seeming fecklessness of successive attempts to combating it.\textsuperscript{8} Today, the problem has permeated all levels of the national polity to the extent that scholars and commentators now talk about a political culture of corruption in Nigeria.\textsuperscript{9}

The purpose of this article is to critically examine the evolution of the problem of corruption in Nigeria. Specifically, the article examines how Nigeria’s postcolonial rulers compromised the future of a country with enormous development potential by entrenching and perpetuating a system that encourages corruption with impunity. The article contributes to the existing literature by explaining when, how and why corruption became entrenched in the Nigerian polity. To properly reflect the longitudinal development and dynamics of corruption in Nigeria, the article focuses on three time periods: 1985-1998, 1999-2007, and 2010-till date.

Nigeria is selected as a case study for two reasons. First, the country has an unenviable reputation for pervasive corruption. To be sure, Nigeria has always


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

ranked among the world’s most corrupt countries, and at times topping the list.\textsuperscript{10} The extent of corruption in Nigeria is now so endemic that it would certainly qualify the country to form part of a category of countries that Jeremy Pope classifies as “those whose national integrity system have effectively collapsed.”\textsuperscript{11} Second, as Africa’s most populous and oil-rich country, and its second largest economy, Nigeria is not only a regional hegemon but also a key player in the global economy. Thus, what happens there matters not just to Nigerians but also to the region and the wider world. Despite Nigeria’s abundant natural resources, over 100 million of its 160 million inhabitants (i.e. 64 per cent) are estimated to live on less than £1 a day. The country has the largest number of poor people in the world after India and China.\textsuperscript{12}

This article relies on content analysis of secondary data sourced from textbooks, journals, press materials, newspapers, government and non-governmental reports, judicial archives and the polls. These textual sources are cross-validated and triangulated with empirical works on corruption in Nigeria and the cumulative observation of this researcher. More general archival searches were made for relevant primary and secondary documentation of corruption at the national scale. This aspect of the research involved frequent travels to various sites within Nigeria (Lagos and Abuja), including university libraries, government offices, national archives, and private residences.

The secondary sources used in this article are significant in several ways. The analysis of press materials on corruption reflects the visible dimensions of the phenomenon and represents the most important mechanism in public culture for the circulation of discourses on corruption. Newspaper articles represent a discursive field that enables the corruption phenomenon to be labeled, discussed, practiced, decried and denounced. Access to judicial archives allows the researcher to appreciate the effectiveness of various mechanisms of suppression and punishment of the phenomenon and their variations according to historical social context. Lastly, the polls and existing surveys provide some measure of the perception of the Nigerian public as to the importance and centrality of corruption, as well as its qualification as an embedded problem.

Following this introduction, the article begins with an attempt to conceptualise and evaluate the definition of corruption from three loosely linked perspectives, which is then followed by a working definition and understanding of corruption. The core of the paper is historically anchored and delivered through an attempt to examine when and how corruption became entrenched and systemic in the Nigerian polity. This is followed by a concluding section that provides prospective recommendations on how to advance the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

2. The Conceptual Framework

Contemporary social science literature defines corruption from three perspectives, namely public-office centered definitions, market-centered definitions and public-interest centered definitions. At the outset, it is important to note that these three definitions are loosely linked since they all assume the separation of the public and private spheres, and view corruption as the inappropriate mix of the two. Nevertheless, these definitions emphasize three significant and interrelated aspects of corruption, namely public office, market and public interest.

2.1 Public-office centered definitions

These sets of definitions focus on the misuse of public office for private gains. Bayley, for example, defines corruption as a general term covering misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gain, which need not be monetary. Werlin sees corruption as the diversion of public resources to non-public purposes. For Wilson, corruption occurs “whenever a person in exchange for some private advantage, acts other than as his duty requires.” In the corruption literature, Nye's public-office-centered definition is the most authoritative. Nye defines corruption as

behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence.

The definition includes behaviours such as bribery (use of reward to pervert the judgment of a person in a position of trust); nepotism (bestowal of patronage by reason of ascriptive relationship rather than merit); and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private-regarding uses).  

2.2 The market-centered definitions

These sets of definitions were espoused by authors interested in earlier Western and contemporary non-Western societies, in which the norms governing public officeholders are underdeveloped or nonexistent. Van Klaveren, for example, argues that

[c]orruption means that a civil servant abuses his authority in order to obtain an extra income from the public... Thus we will conceive corruption in terms of a civil servant who regards his office as a business, the income of which he will... seek to maximize. The office then becomes a maximizing unit.

Here, corruption is identified with personal rent-seeking by officials in derogation of their duties to their principals (higher officials) as established by law. The implication is that if bureaucrats are able to earn more income from external sources – that is, from interest groups seeking government transfers – than from their regular employment, they may allow the demands of the interest groups to override societal needs.

2.3 Public-interest centered definitions

Exponents of this perspective tend to problematise public-office-centered definitions as been too narrow and the market-centered definitions as been too broad. The crux of public-interest definitions is that there is a public which has distinct interests, and that those interests are compromised by private-regarding (corrupt) conduct. In other words, public interest exponents give pride of place to the concept of “public interest” in the analysis of corruption by explicitly and simply asserting the nexus between corruption and the subversion of the public interest.

18 Ibid.
21 Susan Rose-Ackerman, Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2-5.
22 Mbaku, Bureaucratic and Political Corruption.
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Friedrich, for example, argues that “the pattern of corruption can be said to exist whenever a powerholder who is charged with doing certain things, i.e., who is a responsible functionary or officeholder, is by monetary or other rewards not legally provided for, induced to take actions which favour whoever provides the rewards and thereby does damage to the public and its interests.”24 For Alatas, corruption is about “the subordination of public interests to private aims involving a violation of the norms of duty and welfare, accompanied by secrecy, betrayal, deception and a callous disregard for any consequences suffered by the public.”25

A critical examination of the above definitions reveals some limitations. To start with, the first and second sets of definitions beg the questions: Which norms are the ones that will be used to distinguish corrupt from noncorrupt acts? Whose norms set the criteria? As James Scott's classic work in the field begins, “Corruption, we would all agree, involves a deviation from certain standards of behavior. The first question which arises is, what criteria should we use to establish those standards?”26 If the definitions are public-office-centered, then which statement of the rules and norms governing public officeholders is to be employed? If the definitions are public-interest-centered, then whose evaluation of the public's interest is to be operationalised? The market-centered definitions are also problematic in this regard since they imply the presence of an overarching authority who determines what rules should apply to public officials and those that should apply to businessmen operating in the free market.27

Quite aside from this, the idea of corruption-as-illegality – which underpins public-office-centered definitions – “suffers from being simultaneously too narrow and too broad in scope; all illegal acts are not necessarily corrupt and all corrupt acts are not necessarily illegal.”28 In Africa, Olivier De Sardan argues that “the practices that come under the complex of corruption, while being legally culpable and widely reproved, are none the less considered by their perpetrators as being legitimate, and often as not being corruption at all.”29 Moreover, some have argued that the assumed line separating the public from the private sphere, implied in all three corruption definitions, seems unintelligible in an African context where corruption

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27 Heidenheimer et al., Political corruption.
is largely embedded in socio-political life, reinforced by a powerful moral economy in which the spoils of the state are expected to be distributed via networks of patronage.\(^{30}\)

Despite the foregoing limitations, Nye’s classic definition of corruption suffices for our current purpose since it captures the abuse of a public role for private-regarding gain, pecuniary or otherwise. Indeed, no phenomenon is more central to the perception and practice of Nigerian politics than the appropriation of state office for personal and sectarian gain.\(^{31}\) As was the case under successive military rule, this phenomenon has become highly developed, embedded and destructive in Nigeria. Thus, in his work entitled ‘Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria’ Richard Joseph uses the term “prebendal” to identify patterns of political behaviour in Nigeria which rests on the justifying principle that state power should be treated as “a coger of offices which can be competed for, appropriated and then administered for the benefit of individual occupants and their support groups.”\(^{32}\)

The modern African version of this prebendal system operates in “varying systems of formal authority (including personalistic, military and electoral competitive), behind a ‘camouflaging’ façade of ‘legal-rational,’ constitutional, and bureaucratic rules.”\(^{33}\) Subsequently, Larry Diamond argues that corruption “is manifestly the primary mechanism of dominant-class formation...It is not an aberration, but rather the way the system works in the typical African state.”\(^{34}\) A careful perusal of the historical development of corruption in Nigeria confirms this perspective.

3. A Political Culture of Corruption: Historical Perspectives

To properly grasp the dynamics of corruption and impunity in postcolonial Nigeria, one must start with its experience of colonialism which created “a culture of unbridled corruption and fettered democracy.”\(^{35}\) By all standards, British colonialism in Nigeria (circa 1900-1960) was founded on corruption and exploitation legitimised by a system of indirect rule that (ab)used Native Authorities as tools of local governance. As the respected African historian Mahmood Mamdani writes:

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\(^{33}\) Diamond, review of *Democracy and Prebendal Politics*, 284.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.; see also, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

Britain was the first to marshal authoritarian possibilities in indigenous culture. It was the first to realise that key to an alien power’s achieving a hegemonic domination was a cultural project: one of harnessing the moral, historical, and community impetus behind local custom to a larger colonial project.  

The colonial administrative language had a different morality from existing African discourses, which translated into different normative and cognitive standards of behaviour. For example, to encourage Native Authorities to coerce a percentage of their population to work as forced labourers on road clearing and railway construction made perfect sense in the British colonial mindset as a way to have inhabitants contribute to the development of the colony. However, it translated as simple abuse of authority on the local level where it significantly diverged from people’s expectations, both in terms of the role of authority and the processes by which it was imposed. Because of the colonialists’ corrupt disposition to exploit the state for their exclusive benefit, they liquidated social structures against corruption associated with pre-colonial Africa and replaced and/or transformed them to suit their own purposes.

These processes led to the emergence of “two publics in Africa” such that while the primordial public (ruled by indigenous shared norms and customs) was built on a system of accountability and control, based on moral principles, the civic public (ruled by the postcolonial state and its institutions) became a contested terrain for private accumulation based on amoral principles. This marked the beginning of official corruption in Nigeria and the manifestation of a privatised state—a state “appropriated to the service of private interests by the dominant faction of the elite.” The failure of the political elites, who took over power from the colonialists, in attempting to address the root of these problems, and particularly the inability to transform and endogenise the imported social structures, complicated matters in the postcolonial period.

In the postcolonial era, Nigeria’s failures are frequently attributed to rampant...
corruption and frenetic looting by the ruling cabal. As argued by Nigeria’s contemporary griot, Professor Chinua Achebe: “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character.” Corruption emerged as a serious issue during the oil windfall of the 1970s. The era “raised the stakes for the control of power at the centre, and corruption, in the guise of populist economic policies, became an explicit instrument of personal political agenda.” The situation deteriorated during the Second Republic under Alhaji Shehu Shagari when the state did not only become prebendal, but also predatory. These were manifested by the fact that the offices of the state were seen as a “national cake” to be allocated and then exploited as benefits by the office holders. Such a practice was legitimated by a set of political norms, according to which the appropriation of such offices is not just an act of individual greed or ambition, but concurrently the satisfaction of the short-term objectives of a sub-set of the general population.

The (second) coming of the military to the political scene of Nigeria in 1983 marked the peak of corruption in the country (see Table 1). This was particularly so under the Generals Babangida and Abacha regimes, where the system was not only prebendal, but also praetorian.

3.1 General Ibrahim Babangida, 1985-1993

A major feature of corruption in the Babangida regime was the pervasive culture of impunity. It was permissible for any of his officials to loot the state treasury to their heart’s content with impunity, as long as they remained absolutely loyal and committed to him. For the eight years of Babangida’s reign, the regime failed to take a public stance against corruption. Instead it proceeded with hitherto unknown dynamism to establish a sui generis military autocracy, grounded on cronyism, blatant corruption of high-profile individuals and groups in society and ruthless and systematic suppression of real or imagined opponents of the regime. It

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45 Omotola, “Through a Glass Darkly.”
46 A praetorian system is one that “is corrupt and an unstable regime of coups, cliques and conspiracies tempered only by occasional political dictatorships.” Its major features include indiscipline, mercinerism, self-seeking, greed and avarice, sale of public office and prebendalism. Praetorianism is therefore the military equivalent of the corrupt society. See Omotola, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 218.
47 Osoba, “Corruption in Nigeria,” 381.
is important to note that corruption in the Babangida regime was given greater rein by two factors: the eight-year tenure of the regime and the huge surge in oil revenue, including the famous oil windfall occasioned by the Iraq War in 1991. A sum of US$12.67 billion earned during the war could not be accounted for by the Babangida-led regime.  

**Table 1: A Chronology of Nigerian Leaders since 1960**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nigerian Leaders</th>
<th>Leadership Timeline</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tafawa Balewa (Northern People’s Congress)</td>
<td>1960-1966</td>
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<tr>
<td>J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi (Military)</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakubu Gowon (Military)</td>
<td>1966-1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murtala Mohammed (Military)</td>
<td>1975-1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olusegun Obasanjo (Military)</td>
<td>1976-1979</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shehu Shagari (National Party of Nigeria)</td>
<td>1979-1983</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muhammadu Buhari (Military)</td>
<td>1984-1985</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ibrahim Babangida (Military)</td>
<td>1985-1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernest Shonekan (Military)</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sani Abacha (Military)</td>
<td>1993-1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abdulsalami Abubakar (Military)</td>
<td>1998-1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olusegun Obasanjo (People’s Democratic Party)</td>
<td>1999-2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umaru Yar’Adua (People’s Democratic Party)</td>
<td>2007-2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goodluck Jonathan (People’s Democratic Party)</td>
<td>2010-present</td>
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A curious action taken in the late 1980s by the Babangida regime was its release of the ill-amassed assets seized from top government officials who served in Yakubu Gowon’s regime, after these officials were found guilty of corrupt enrichment by a special military tribunal. These seized assets were returned to their “owners.” Babangida also released most of the corrupt politicians incarcerated by Mohammadu Buhari’s regime and restored to them their lost military ranks, in addition to tendering a national apology to the officers. In 1991 Babangida’s regime also formally rehabilitated all the politicians who had been probed, found guilty of corruption, and dismissed with ignominy from office by Murtala Mohammed’s regime.

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Among the more prominent of these were Jim Nwobodo, former governor of Anambra State, who was convicted of corruption, sentenced to 22 years imprisonment and ordered to refund N9.95 million, but later became a senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; Solomon Lar, former governor of Plateau State, found guilty of corrupt operation of a “security” vote, and sentenced to 21 years in jail, but later became chairperson of the ruling People's Democratic Party; Samuel Ogbemudia, former military governor of the then Bendel State, found guilty of corrupt enrichment and made to forfeit millions of naira worth of assets to the federal government by a special tribunal under the Murtala Mohammed regime in 1975, but went on to become a civilian governor of the same state in 1983; Philip Asiodu, found guilty of corruption by the same tribunal, but who later became senior presidential advisor on the economy.\(^{50}\) As a consequence of these actions of Babangida’s regime, the wrong signal was sent to public officials and the general public that corruption in the public sector was a pardonable offence, thus making conformance to ethical standards appear to be foolish.

Not only did the Babangida regime encourage corruption by pardoning corrupt officials convicted by his predecessors and returning their seized properties,

> the regime officially sanctioned corruption in the country and made it difficult to apply the only potent measures, long prison terms and seizure of ill-gotten wealth, for fighting corruption in Nigeria in the future.\(^{51}\)

This pattern of “pardoning” and recycling corrupt leaders has continued to this day in Nigeria (as we shall see later).

Quite aside, the Babangida government searched for ways to delay democratic transition and prop up support for military rule. To this end, the creation of states was a key strategy used to divide the opposition or recruit new ranks of support for increasingly corrupt and dysfunctional military rule.\(^{52}\) This was also part of a wider programme of regime survival. The interim administration of Chief Ernest Shonekan was invited to take over power from Babangida after his regime was forced to step aside in 1993 due to an election debacle. However, this interim government was ousted after only three months by a military coup which led to the ascension to power of General Sani Abacha.

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50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 173.
3.2 General Sani Abacha, 1993-1998

Upon taking power, General Abacha, the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, annulled the organs of state, banned political parties and dismantled the democratic structures. Abacha argued that Western-style democracy is not always suitable in Africa. Issues cause division, he says, when it is consensus that is needed.\(^{53}\) Under Abacha, the Nigerian “rule of law” was dealt a fatal blow. For example, the regime enacted Decree No. 12, of 1994, which officially removed the authority of the courts to investigate, let alone challenge, the actions of members of the regime. Claude Ake argues that when this happens, “the state effectively ceases to exist as a state and compromises its ability to pursue development.”\(^{54}\)

In five years of dictatorship and frenetic looting, Abacha paralyzed the machinery of governance and pauperized the citizenry.\(^{55}\) He notably arrested or incarcerated commercial bank chiefs in Lagos while he and his kitchen cabinet were simultaneously stealing and stashing away in banks around the world between US$5 Billion and US$50 Billion.\(^{56}\) It is therefore not surprising that a report on corruption, published in 1997 and 1998 by the Berlin-based organisation Transparency International listed Nigeria as the most corrupt nation in the world—a ranking which led to a popular perception of Nigeria as a country synonymous with corruption.

International pressure forced Abacha to announce a three-year timetable for the transition to democracy in October 1995, but the plans were plagued by repeated delays until June 1998 when Abacha was announced dead. Nearly 15 years after Abacha's death, the Swiss Government repatriated the sum of US$700 million stolen by the late dictator and deposited in several Swiss banks.\(^{57}\) The Nigerian government has also recovered over US$100 million of the funds stolen by Abacha and his family from the autonomous British island of Jersey and an estimated US$150 million from Luxembourg. Other funds belonging to Abacha remain frozen in accounts in Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom.\(^{58}\) In November 2009, Abacha's son was convicted by a Swiss court for his role in a criminal organisation and seized $350 million in assets stolen from Nigeria.\(^{59}\) Ocheje argues


\(^{54}\) Agbiboa, “Leaders or Leeches,” 96.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{56}\) Ocheje, “Law and Social Change.”

\(^{57}\) Agbiboa, “Between Corruption and Development.”

\(^{58}\) Ibid.

that in direct consequence of so much venality in public life, poverty has now embedded itself among the people of Nigeria.\(^{60}\)

Between 1960 and 1999, the Nigerian rulers had stolen close to $440 billion.\(^{61}\) This is six times the Marshal Plan, the sum total needed to rebuild devastated Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. An official report of an international development agency confirmed that in 2000, the standard of living in Nigeria roughly equals what it was in the early 1970s, a period immediately following three years of civil war.\(^{62}\) The unfettered nature of corruption under military rule was confirmed by Nigeria's first democratically elected president Olusegun Obasanjo:

There was corruption! Corruption! And Corruption! Everywhere and all the time! Corruption was not only rife, it had eaten so deeply into the marrow of our existence that looters and fraudsters had become our heroes, and it seemed we could no longer place any faith in honesty and decency and hard work.\(^{63}\)

3.3 President Olusegun Obasanjo, 1999-2007

The democratic government of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler and respected international statesman who had handed power back to civilians in 1979, was expected to break away from the country's corrupt and repressive past.\(^{64}\) Despite its early promise, Obasanjo's reign was undermined by high-level corruption and development failure. Obasanjo's rule was not without some merit. Early in his term in office, he correctly identified Nigeria's debt issue as an obstacle to sustainable development. Along with his reliable finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (2003-2006), he was able to broker a deal that effectively wiped out Nigeria's entire $30 billion external debt by paying $12.4 billion and having $17.6 billion annulled. This was the largest such financial deal in sub-Saharan Africa.\(^{65}\)

During his inaugural address in May 1999, Obasanjo stated that

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Agbiboa, “Between Corruption and Development.”
\(^{65}\) Adebajo, “Hegemony on a Shoestring.”
corruption, the greatest bane of society today, will be tackled head-on at all levels...No society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become full blown cancer as it has become in Nigeria. 66

In other words, Obasanjo promised millions of Nigerians that corruption will not be business-as-usual during his reign. To this end, he established the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). Under the inspired leadership of Nuhu Ribadu, the EFCC recovered over $5 billion in stolen assets and prosecuted corrupt businessmen, politicians and policemen. 67

In unprecedented moves in 2005, Tofa Balogun, Nigeria's Inspector General of Police, was convicted of corruption and jailed; Fabian Osuji, education minister, and Mobolaji Osomo, housing and urban development minister, were also dismissed from office for respectively bribing legislators to pass a budget and selling government properties. 68 In collaboration with the London Metropolitan Police, the EFCC also uncovered some high-profile cases of corruption among Nigerian governors two of which are discussed here. The first case involves Joshua Dariye, former governor of Plateau state, who was found to operate 25 bank accounts in London alone to juggle money and evade the law. Like many governors of his ilk, Dariye used front agents to penetrate western real estate markets where he purchased expensive properties. The London Metropolitan Police determined Dariye had acquired £10 million in benefits through criminal conduct in London, while domestically EFCC were able to restrain proceeds of his crimes worth $34 million. 69 In the other case, former governor of the oil-rich Delta state, James Ibori, pled guilty in the Southwark Crown Court in London to charges of money laundering and other financial crimes totalling 12.4 billion naira ($79 million) he had committed during his eight-years in office. Ibori was sentenced to 13 years in prison. 70

Transparency International’s 2005 report showed that under Obasanjo Nigeria moved within a year from third to sixth position, as the most corrupt nation in the world—an improvement on its performance in 2004 and 2003 when it occupied second and first position, respectively, on the list of the world's most corrupt nations. Daniel Kaufmann, head of global programmes at the World Bank, applauded the corruption cleanup efforts of Obasanjo’s administration when he said “Nigeria is changing for the better... if the current momentum is maintained and

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67 Agbiboa, “Corruption and Economic Crimes.”
68 Ibid.
69 Agbiboa, “Leaders or Leeches.”
70 Ibid.
deepened, the progress made in the fight against corruption could become irreversible.”  

Unfortunately, the anti-corruption drive of the Obasanjo administration was short-lived. His administration soon became littered with postures of reform, with grandiose promises and conspicuous lack of delivery. Finance minister Okonji-Iweala was dismissed from office by Obasanjo in 2006, and the EFCC was accused of manipulation by Obasanjo to target his political opponents in a selective manner. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), the EFCC was “used [by Obasanjo] as a political weapon to whip political foes, especially state governors likely to stand for the presidency and their supporters, into line.” For example, five state governors, some of whom were considered contenders for the PDP presidential nomination, were impeached in 2005-2006 on allegations of corruption.

Obasanjo’s botched attempt to change the Nigerian constitution in April 2006 to afford him the opportunity of running for a third presidential term badly damaged his democratic credentials. He reportedly offered bribes of $400,000 to senators and representatives, had armed police break up a meeting in Abuja of legislators and governors opposed to a third term, and threatened state governors who failed to support his bid with impeachment. Obasanjo’s legacy was further soiled by an ugly spat with his vice-president, Atiku Abubakar, which saw both men publicly accusing each other of corruption regarding the government’s Petroleum Technology Trust. In addition, under Obasanjo, who acted as his own oil minister throughout his eight years rule, Nigeria staged the most fraudulent elections in its history. Ballot boxes were stuffed and stolen, voters intimidated, and results appeared out of thin air in areas where voting had clearly not taken place.

Like the military before him, Obasanjo’s administration openly encouraged corruption with impunity. A case in point was that of Chief Olabode George, a powerful figure within the ruling party under President Obasanjo and also former chairman of the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA). In August 2008, Olabode was charged with contract-related offenses of close to N100 billion dating back to his time at the NPA. In October 2009, Olabode was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison.

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72 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Adebajo, “Hegemony on a Shoestring.”
and a half years in prison after a surprisingly efficient trial. However, when Olabode emerged from prison in 2011 after serving a two-and-a-half year sentence following a landmark EFCC prosecution, he was treated to a rapturous welcome by members of Nigeria’s political elite including President Obasanjo and then Defense Minister, Ademola Adetokunbo. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, this action showed that “proven criminality” was “no bar to the highest echelons of politics in Nigeria.”77 Reacting to the lavish reception, former anti-corruption czar Nuhu Ribadu said: “it is really a shameful thing that has happened. Instead of hiding their heads in shame they have the effrontery to celebrate corruption, in fact it is a national shame.”78 According to the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the “PDP’s action sends a wrong signal to Nigerian youths that it is alright to steal or mismanage public funds, since it can even turn them into a ‘hero’ like Olabode George.”79

In the end, Obasanjo’s democratic rule proved a bundle of contradictions. Considered as an indispensable force for stability, he instead oversaw one of Nigeria's worst periods of instability. Earlier considered a force for unity, he presided uneasily over a country that is perhaps now more divided than at any time in its history since the civil war of 1967-1970. Considered a force for national salvation, he instead watched helplessly as the country was nearly torn apart by sectarian violence.80 While much of the decay in the Nigerian polity had set in under the venal regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha, the situation was further aggravated under Obasanjo’s rule.

3.4 President Goodluck Jonathan, since 2010

In contemporary Nigeria, corruption has shown no sign of abating. If anything, the phenomenon has increased under the current presidency of Goodluck Jonathan—whom some have called the “accidental president” due to the manner in which he originally inherited office from his predecessor, Umar Yar’Adua, who died in May 2010 after a protracted illness. Most of the corruption in this period is directly related to the capture of oil revenues and theft of oil resources which is particularly destructive.

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
According to a recently leaked investigative report into Nigeria’s oil and gas industry by the Chairman of the Petroleum Revenue Task Force, Nuhu Ribadu, nearly $30 billion was lost in the last decade in an apparent gas price-fixing scam implicating government officials and foreign energy firms. The 205-page parliamentary report uncovered a long list of alleged wrongdoings involving oil retailers, Nigeria’s Oil Management Company and the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation. Specifically, the report showed that oil and gas companies owe the Nigerian treasury a combined US$3 billion in royalties. Between 2005 and 2011, another US$566 million was owed by companies for the right to exploit an oil block, known as “signature bonuses.” According to the leaks, a total of fifteen fuel importers collected more than US$300 million recently without importing any fuel, while more than 100 oil marketers collected the same amount of money on several occasions.

In April 2012 a House of Representatives Committee led by Farouk Lawan and charged with investigating the fuel subsidy program (between 2009 and 2012) released a report showing massive fraud, corruption, and inefficiencies in the running of the program. The report alleged misappropriation of US$6 billion in the fuel subsidy scam, with poor or nonexistent oversight by government agencies. Furthermore, the report cited the stealing of 32.8 billion naira (US$210 million) Police Pension Fund, which led to the arraignment of six suspects including a director at the Police Pension Office, Atiku Abubakar Kigo, who later rose to become permanent secretary in the Ministry of the Niger Delta, and the criminal charges against former Governor of Bayelsa state, Timipre Sylva, for laundering five billion naira (US$32 million) of state funds. In 2011 alone, the Nigerian government paid 900 times more in the subsidy than was budgeted, suggesting the complicity of the finance ministry and the central bank in the arrangement. In July 2012, the government released a list of those who had benefited illegally from the

82 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
subsidy fund, which implicated key government officials in the Jonathan-led administration.\textsuperscript{88}

Like his predecessors, President Goodluck Jonathan has also embraced a system that rewards corruption rather than punishes it. In the most recent example, President Jonathan granted a pardon to ex-Bayelsa state Governor and former ally, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha (1999-2005) – who was convicted of stealing millions of dollars during his time in office – because he had been “remorseful.”\textsuperscript{89} Alamieyeseigha was also declared free to run for elections again. It is instructive to note that there are two steps leading to the granting of a presidential pardon. The first gatekeeper is the Presidential Advisory Committee on the Prerogative of Mercy. This body peruses any proposal by the President and makes its recommendations. However, President Jonathan bypassed this due process and went straight to the National Council of State, which considered and approved his request. According to Nigeria’s Nobel Laureate Professor Wole Soyinka, “what is going on right now gives the picture of a government that is floundering and justifying the unjustifiable. It amounts to encouragement of corruption.”\textsuperscript{90}

In 2013, a report submitted to the US Congress by the Secretary of State confirmed massive corruption at all levels of the Jonathan-led government. The document entitled “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012” stated that “[m]assive, widespread, and pervasive corruption affected all levels of government and the security forces in Nigeria.”\textsuperscript{91} Furthermore, the report scored the Nigerian judiciary system low as it noted,

[t]here was a widespread perception judges were easily bribed and litigants could not rely on the courts to render impartial judgements. Citizens encountered long delays and alleged requests from judicial officials for bribes to expedite cases or obtain favourable rulings.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{88} BBC News Africa, “Nigeria: Oil-Gas Sector Mismanagement.”
The report stated that though Nigerian law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.\(^93\)

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of the problem of corruption in Nigeria, with attention to how the corrupt practices of Nigeria’s postcolonial rulers have effectively turned a country with enormous potential into a crippled giant. Today, the corruption profile of Nigeria has risen to a worrisome level as many convicted political elites continue to go largely unpunished or are given a mild sentence that makes a mockery of their monumental theft. The situation has not only undermined whatever progress has been made on the anti-corruption front, but has clearly underscored a general lack of political will to fight the menace. It is therefore not surprising that in its recently released Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International ranks Nigeria as the eighth most corrupt out of 107 countries in 2013, with 84 per cent of those surveyed in Nigeria claiming corruption had increased in the past two years—a higher percentage than any other country in the world.\(^94\)

To curb the problem of corruption in Nigeria, a fusion of national and international strategies is required. At the national level, the current presidency of Goodluck Jonathan must publicly signal a commitment to break with the bad practices of previous administrations, especially the political interference with anti-corruption investigations and prosecutions. This should be combined with strong political will to ensure that those accused of corruption are properly investigated, punished and blacklisted from politics if found guilty, irrespective of their positions and connections. As well, government should set up an independent investigatory panel to review charges of corruption within government and the private sector. President Jonathan should endorse the panel and commit to ensure it has both the scope and the power to investigate and prosecute.

At the international level, Nigeria’s international partners must maintain strong political pressure on the Nigerian government to allow anti-corruption institutions, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), to pursue robust and independent investigations of high-level corruption. They must also (a) actively pursue opportunities to bring criminal charges against Nigerian government officials who commit financial crimes in foreign jurisdictions and (b) make wide and proactive use of visa bans to deny Nigerian government officials credibly implicated

\(^93\) Ibid.
in corruption the opportunity to travel or invest their ill-amassed wealth abroad. The names of all Nigerian government officials denied visas on allegations of corruption should also be made public.

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