

The Foundation and Political Economy of Corruption in Nigeria: “Between Fact and Fable”

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Abstract: Amongst the lasting challenges of development and growth of Nigeria and Nigerians none exceed that of corruption and its control. The paper analysed the basis of corruption as advanced by the revisionist theorists and a realistic overview of the incidence of corruption in Nigeria. Using a conflicting approach, the paper submits that, revisionists’ belief is an erroneous assumption and a figment of the imagination of the west, which upholds that, corruption is rooted and imbedded in the normative socialisation and the cultural orientation of Africans. This paper therefore argued critically against this misrepresentation of Africans, particularly Nigerian that it is not just academically misleading but intellectually unsustainable. The paper concludes that the emergence and spread of corruption is traced to the economic philosophy of capitalism which encourages and promotes indiscriminate capital accumulation for not just recognition but tenacious oppressive tendencies. There is need for a more robust academic approach in the assessment and analysis of the socio-political and economic challenges of any society for a realistic conclusion. Secondly, consideration should be given to the African writers who live and study the environmental challenges of the affected societies for first hand and unbiased findings.

Keywords: Corruption, Capitalism, Revisionist, Growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

The incidence of corruption and its spread in developing nations like Nigeria has been a major concern and point of reference in socio-economic description of such nation. Corruption, to a large extent remains synonymous with the Nigerian nation and Nigerians across the globe. The fight against it also appeared to have been a mirage as all efforts to combating it remain elusive. This failure may have been the basis to justify the position and theoretical postulations of the revisionist theorists that attach corruption to the character and characteristics of Nigerians. This paper is a realistic assessment of the emergence and spread of corruption in Nigeria. The paper adopts a conflicting approach to debase the position of the revisionist argument that corruption is inherent in the composition and life of Nigerians society. They attribute bureaucratic successes and development to inducements and graft which have been the major motivating factors that fuel the socio economic struggles. The paper is an explanatory one that analyses the contextual submission of this theory (revisionists) against the reality of corruption incidence in Nigeria.

2. THEORETICAL POSTULATION

Effort to explain the nature and causes of corruption in Nigeria has been one of the major concerns of many. Scholars and public policy practitioners have, at various times and climes traced corruption to the growing thirst for materialism and to some extent, over-flogged this major concern. These efforts have resulted in theories and postulations in order to establish reasons for the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria and other developing economies. Consequently, there arose and inadvertent infusion of factors premised within the social and economic context of an individual Nigerian and his life.

While arguments abound to stress the emergence of corruption from economic perspective, a group of scholars referred to as the revisionist theorists emphasised the normative inherency of corrupt practices in the third world countries like Nigeria (Obasi, 1988). The revisionist argument is anchored on the assumption that corruption is incentivising, necessary and inevitable in developing nations like Nigeria, the benefits of which fuel the smooth operations of public institutions, market economy and functionalist (public officials). That, in developing societies, corrupt practices are accepted and incorporated as part of the societal norm (see Obasi, 1988). As the argument of the revisionists sounds appealing and seemingly infallible in describing the phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria, it is also correct to say that it makes meaning only to the extent that it describes the prevalence and not the root cause of the menace in Nigeria. The theory is also useful in providing an insightful clue to understanding the nature and character of corrupt activities.

However, the revisionist theory is arguably a semantic escapism from reality, especially when attention is paid on the basic foundations of the theory, viz; insitutionalist, market economy and functionalist. The understanding of the nature of corruption and its effects can only be appreciated within those premises. On the contrary, there is a growing consensus among scholars that the nature and causes of corruption is only traceable to the economic structure and political foundation of Nigeria, an argument that sounds logical and intellectually valid and sustainable. This paper therefore aligns itself with this position. The Nigerian economy is patterned along the capitalist orientation. Capitalism, whose theoretical foundation is rooted in selfishness and greed, is more prone to corruption than socialism especially when viewed against primitive accumulation of resources (Yima, 2008). Capitalist economic philosophy promotes the accumulation of wealth for private ends in order to meet and sustain the materialistic taste of an imbibed western style of consumption as against the indigenously evolved life style and consumption. Since the psyche of an average Nigerian have been programmed to imbibe the western taste of life without attention and emphasis on the acquisition of western skill to replicate such efforts locally, the dependency of Nigerian on imported products became inevitably promoted. This therefore further necessitated the struggle and competition for continuous accumulation of wealth and consumption of goods that are apparently outside the basic needs and comfort of an individual Nigerian. Economic supremacy is upheld to be regarded as the basis for power and political hegemony in such a neo imperialist Nigerian society.

The political economy of corruption in Nigeria could be likening to the Garret Harden's theory, "*The tragedy of the commons*". The Tragedy of the Commons is a problem that occurs when individuals exploit a shared resource to the extent that demand overwhelmed supply and the resources become unavailable to some or even all. Garret Hardin, an evolutionary biologist wrote the tragedy of the common published in 1968. His main concern was overpopulation. He used the example of commonly-used grazing land which could provide adequately as long as the number of herders grazing on it was kept in check through natural population control mechanism such as war and disease. If the numbers were to increase as a result of checks being overcome, the land would be no longer sufficient to support the population. Each person sharing the land, acting in self interest would continue to tax the resources of the commons despite the fact that if enough people do so, the land will be damaged and unable to support them.

The phenomenon of corruption, it causes and the fight against it in Nigerian has a shared similitude with the theoretical stand of *The Tragedy of the Common theory*. For as long as the exploitative tendencies of the elites are not kept under check and control, the common wealth will remain continuously scarce and or unavailable for the benefits of the commons. The greater tragedy is even when the shared resources are being diverted away from the common wealth, government on its part uses the same resources belonging to the commons to trace other stolen wealth that were hardly or never returned back to the treasury of the commons. Government established Anti graft agencies and most times administrative panel of enquiries with same resources, pay their staff and operations including prosecuting attorneys but all with no impressive results.

Little wonder that the effects of capitalism have transcended down to the lowest level of the Nigerian economy since the economy remains largely informal. Prices of goods and services are determined and or influenced by primitive factors which further allows for rent seeking behaviour, a situation aptly described by Riggs (1964) as "canteen bazaar" in his study of prismatic society. But, Obasi, (1988) on his part however submitted and argued in favour of an economic structure pattern along socialist philosophy where government control of both social and economic activities will sufficiently be more developmentally impactful than the current capitalist approach. The wisdom embedded in his position (Obasi, 1988) is that, government's involvement in socio economic life of its citizen ensures control of behaviour. Individual activities and struggles in both market and public institutions will be for collective good and growth not for an individual interest or personal aggrandisement. This spirit of collectivism naturally overshadows that of

individualism, which further ensures coordinated efforts toward collective growth. It also prevents unfettered accumulation of wealth and struggle for economy /political hegemony. For instance, the striking revelations of arms deal shrouded with corruption where over two billion US dollars (The guardian, 2015, Thisday live, 2015, Premium times news, 2015) were diverted from its original purpose confirms further the inordinate quest to consolidate and sustain an already established political hegemony by a group of “cabals”. The Dasukigate (Former National Security Adviser to the Former President Goodluck Jonathan) lives no one in doubt that the bane of this kind of corruption is certainly to capture and remain relevance in power politics. This establishes the relationship between power and economic supremacy; one definitely remains the corollary of the other. The real source of power, recognition and or relevance is the amount of economic influence one enjoys. The capitalist oriented economy only creates a dual societal structure where the rich interfaces with the poor on the other side in a relationship better described as “an exploitative fraternity”. This is where the rich obtains the services and cooperation of the poor for his continuous growth and economic fortunes while the poor needs the unsolicited handout from the rich for his survival. In other words, the poor wallows in a continuously abject poverty in an economic viable space controlled by a few capitalist and tendentious exploitative elites. This situation somewhat denotes an extreme condition of capitalist economy which only promotes all forms of inequality, class consciousness and all time corruption that apparently defy all tested measures.

In other readings, meanwhile, the colonial economy of Nigeria was essentially agricultural and solid minerals economy. Produce like groundnuts, cocoa, palm oil and kernels, and livestock, including hides and skins were the principal cash agro-products. There were also food agro-products like cassava, yams, rice, maize, corn and others. The solid minerals of tin, columbite and coal also nourished the export-oriented Nigerian economy. Even with the discovery of oil in 1957 the fundamental economic resources of Nigeria are still agriculture and solid minerals, now abandoned for the monoculture of the hydrocarbon industry.

The political economy of pre-colonial Nigeria, being an agrarian one with all its attributes is expected to have been significantly transformed with the presence of the British government and their capitalist economic philosophy. This is true when viewed from the recourses abound in Nigeria, the hope for greater and developed economic structure transcended through political independence and even more with the oil boom in the 1970's. These hopes remain essentially a mirage as a result of the inbuilt corruption in the Nigeria political –economic system (capitalism). The problem of Nigeria is not that of building alliances within regions or between and among ethnic or religious groups and mix of nationalities or zones for elections. There is a problem of national thieving elites versus the broad masses both of which classes are everywhere. Some of those who steal public funds use them to contest and win political power and also recycle themselves within power cycle. They amend constitution to protect their interests and thereby creating a “cabal” that promotes and sustains the hegemony of corruption. Despite the ingenuity and relevance of zoning and rotation of political and other top public service positions to address national question in Nigeria, the Nigerian political development challenges go beyond that. These challenges include how to promote equity, even development and ensure that due processes are not violated or manipulated in public administration.

Corruption in Nigeria is not only political or institutional but societal to the extent one would be tempted to align his argument to that of revisionist. The tenet of corruption and societal norm in Nigeria are closely inseparable to the extent norms and ethnic affiliations provide cover and recipe for corruption champions. This is to quietly admit that corruption in Nigeria has gradually been accepted as a normal behaviour due to its prevailing circumstance and growth over the years.

This argument cannot be dislodged easily even when government efforts to control corruption are considered. The policy initiative to control and manage corruption dates back to the military era in Nigeria. Some of the attempts to control corruption under the military regime include the Buhari/Idiagbon war against indiscipline and corruption of 1984, the Babangida decree 419, and the Abacha failed Bank Tribunal. These were decrees promulgated to galvanise efforts to fight corruption. While these efforts and initiatives are applauded for being in place, the impact is still questionable because the ugly menace of corruption is seen to be on the rise. The return to civil rule in Nigeria in 1999 evidently captured the need to fight corruption as one of the major concerns to all the political parties aspiring to form government. The people's Democratic Party (PDP) under Former President Obasanjo made this a top priority in his government agenda. This effort was translated to what are now the Independent Corrupt Practice and other Related offence

Commission (ICPC), The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Bureau for Public Procurement (BPP), Financial Intelligent Unit and other reforms in the Nigerian civil service, among others. All these agencies since inception are functionally present to actualise the vision/ mission of their mandates and also meet up with the objective for which they were established.

The philosophical intention behind the establishment of these agencies is seen to be genuinely commendable. The area of concern when assessing the performance and /or effectiveness of these anti-graft agencies should be on the ecology of public administration within which the agencies operate. For instance, the economic environment which is described as informal and also patterned along capitalist philosophy that allows for unhealthy competition and accumulation of excessive wealth/ property used for oppression; social factors such as religious bigotry and ethnic chauvinism that become major avenue for political fraternity in Nigeria; political and electoral process that are premised on ethnic , religious and regional jingoism, these factors play a significant role in shaping the leadership pattern and also policies that guide the administration. Even when laudable and transformational policies were made, the implementation will hardly escape the hindrances of those peculiar ecological factors. As a result of this, political corruption became more prevalence and economically damaging than all other forms of corruption in recent times (Yima, 2008). The amount of money drained through corruption since independence as at 2005 stood at USD450b (N285trillion). This amount excludes the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation's fuel subsidy funds, the pension fund looted and many other funds drained through the NNPC. Administrative panels of enquires were set up at various time to investigate these scandals. These panels include the Presidential Panel of Enquiry headed by a Former Chairman of the EFCC, Malam Nuhu Ribadu, and the Farouk Lawal panel of enquiry set by the legislatures. The panels were funded with public treasury with no implementable findings. Not to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of political/ grand corruption, corruption in Nigeria assumed dimension of differential proportion. The incidence of nepotism propelled by ethnic linkages is pronounced more in the public service recruitment processes, promotion and placement. Politicians are more popular when they secure jobs and or allocate value to their people using their privileges/ positions of advantage in government (Obasi, 2006). The number of jobs and favours attracted to a member (s) of a community through whichever means conventional or otherwise enrich the political credentials of that individual during electioneering campaign.

3. CONCLUSION

The argument running through this paper is basically to counter the erroneous impression of the revisionists on the corruption status of Nigeria and indeed the African society. The paper provides basis for an interface between reality and assumption. Revisionist theory is a subjective assumption of the western world that seeks to program the psyche of African scholars and administrator/ leaders into submitting and accepting the supposed moral inadequacies of Nigerians. It is evident therefore that corruption, on the contrary is a product of the systematic imposition of western economic philosophy of capitalism that propels unnecessary accumulation of resources for economic and political supremacy and ego. All these theoretical exposition that seek to align corruption to the normative inclination of African societies are part of the tentacles of the British lordship over the black race which further advanced the cocksure disposition of the western world against the black nations.

It is against this backdrop that there is a need for a robust academic approach in any effort to study African socio, political and economic socialisation especially when assessing the challenges confronting development and stability. There should also be a sustainable synergy between the African scholars and their western counterparts in the development of progressive knowledge that can instigate policy initiative that reflects true socio economic and political challenges confronting Africa and other developing economies. This will no doubt avail the international organisations and other donor agencies an opportunity to appreciate and respond appropriately in their quest to intervene and or assist the African nations to overcome their challenges.

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