

EVALUATING THE CULTURAL, TRIBAL, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS IMPEDING MEASURES AIMED AT FINANCIAL CRIME AND ELECTORAL FRAUD IN NIGERIA

A keynote paper presented by Garba Abari, Director-General, National Orientation Agency (NOA) at the 6th Annual Conference on financial Crime, Cross-Border Crime and Electoral Fraud held from 9, 10 & 11 November, 2021 at the NICON Luxury Hotel, Abuja.

Introduction

Let me sincerely appreciate the organizers of this annual conference, the Forensic Insight International Limited for the kind invitation to participate and also present the keynote paper. I count this a great privilege, and would like to express my profound appreciation for this gracious consideration. The choice of the theme is highly commendable in view of the effort by the Buhari administration to address financial crimes and other acts of corruption in Nigeria. I wish the conference successful engagement and positive outcomes.

For the purpose of this paper, the term corruption is used in generic terms to refer to financial crime, electoral fraud and other forms of corruption. There is a consensus that corruption is the bane of Nigeria's development. Corruption, financial and economic crimes, electoral fraud and violence, criminal activities such as terrorism, banditry, kidnappings, violent ethno-religious conflicts, etc, heightened to an intolerable level that Nigerians rose in unison and demanded for change.

Consequently, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, swept into power in 2015 on the plank of a 3-point agenda to fight corruption, address insecurity and revamp the Nigerian economy. It is important to acknowledge that the President has remained consistently committed and focused on the fight against corruption and insecurity. The journey has no doubt been difficult and tortuous, but visible milestones have certainly and clearly been recorded.

Today, Nigerians are more conscious of the negative effects of corruption on Nigeria's national development, and are more than ever before, committed to supporting the fight against corruption. Anti-corruption agencies have so far made huge recoveries running into billions of naira, including properties from corrupt government officials while many have been sentenced to various jail terms. The ease of doing business and investor confidence have been enhanced tremendously.

The fight against corruption in Nigeria can only be fully realised if all Nigerians are involved in one way or the other. Government alone cannot succeed without the

institutional levels, both in their conversations and actions against corruption in all its ramifications. This much was re-enforced by President Muhammadu Buhari when he said that ***“if Nigeria fails to kill corruption, corruption will kill Nigeria”***.

One unfortunate trend that has emerged in recent years is the cultural, ethnic and religious stereotyping of corruption. Corrupt Nigerians are now finding refuge in their religious, ethnic and political cleavages, platforms and associations to fight back corruption. Not only is this impeding the fight against corruption, it is also emboldening people to be more and more corrupt. The big question is why has culture, ethnicity and religion become limiting factors in the fight against corruption when our cultural, religious and social values are known to abhor corruption and other societal ills while promoting hardwork, honesty and community service and ownership.

This paper will focus on identifying factors responsible for this unfortunate role reversal, and make recommendations on the way forward in our collective fight against corruption and criminality.

Corruption

According to dictionary.cambridge.com, Corruption means, ***“illegal, bad or dishonest behaviour, especially by people in positions of power.”***

Chief Emeka Anyaoku, a Distinguished Nigerian and Former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, opined that ***“corruption is by far the greatest bane of our national, economic and political development. It is a formidable cankerworm that needs to be comprehensively addressed if our country is to regain health and begin to function maximally for the benefit of the entire Nigerian people. If the truth must be told, corruption now afflicts virtually all parts of the Nigeria society. It has eaten deep into our value system and is now threatening to spread to our culture.”***

This bring to the fore the urgent need for all to accept the fact that our moral and core national values have been eroded by the singular fact of our inability or refusal to imbibe the inherent virtues of moral and value compass.

Culture, Religion and Corruption

Culture is generally described as the way of life of a people. In other words, it is the totality of attitudes, values, goals and practices shared by individuals in a group, organisation or society. Culture therefore reflects the moral and ethical beliefs and standards that determine how people should behave and interact with others.

Nigeria is a complex and heterogeneous nation with very rich cultural heritage. The traditional cultural heritage of Nigeria is anchored on the values of honesty,

for elders and constituted authorities, respect for the sanctity of human life and other related values. Pre-colonial Nigerian societies were well organized and integrated and had firm and equitable political, social and economic systems that effectively catered for the needs of their members. These societies had their own processes of socialization through which cultural values and norms were inculcated among the people, especially the youths. People with questionable sources of wealth were questioned, and if unable to account for such wealth, were made outcasts and publicly shamed. Wealth acquired through hardwork and integrity was well acknowledged and celebrated.

Unfortunately, over the years, these values progressively eroded and are almost completely lost. What pervades in the society today is widespread and deep-seated culture of corruption, violence, impunity, intolerance, hate and discrimination, rape, cultism, and other social vices, and all these are impacting negatively on the society.

At this point, it will be germane to highlight a few of the factors responsible for this:

1. **Colonialism and Globalization** - Alien values completely at variance with our cherished traditional values were imported and infused into our culture. In the course of time, we lost our cultural identity and relegated our cultural values to the background. Today, corruption is celebrated and promoted through unscrupulous award of chieftaincy titles, honorary doctorate degrees, and other awards.
2. **Primitive Acquisition Tendencies** - Nigeria is indeed a great nation with vast mineral, agricultural, human resources, etc. to produce enough to go round and satiate everyone but for the covetous greed and dishonesty of a few. The capitalist economy imposed by the colonial administration did not see commerce in the humane context of our traditional life but emphasized profit maximization. This heightened primitive acquisition tendencies and sowed the seed of unbridled corruption, avarice and self-aggrandizement. Otherwise, how can just one person loot billions of naira and own hundreds of houses and other properties. Money has come to be misconstrued as the true definition of value, and the culture of money worship in our society has almost been elevated to the status of religion.
3. **Mismanagement of Resources** - Nigeria's oil wealth brought with it the culture of impunity as a result of the way resources were managed especially during the military regimes. Our cultural values became greatly denigrated. Might became right and materialism was elevated over and above integrity and productive hardwork while meritocracy was sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity. As some would say, "**oil boom became oil doom.**"

4. **Primitivist Politics** - The political system of governance since

Politics of personality, religion and ethnicity have continued to characterize the political landscape while the politics of ideas, principles and development is relegated to the background. Today, we have strong individuals and not strong institutions. As a result, politics is driven by individuals and not by democratic institutions and values. Thus, politics has become 'war' in which desperate political actors use thuggery, electoral violence and other criminal acts to attain power.

In terms of religion, all religions in Nigeria preach against evil, corruption and all kinds of social vices. It is expected therefore that with the preponderance and spread of these religions in Nigeria, as eloquently demonstrated by the huge number of mosques and churches, the society will be free of corruption and crimes. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Religion has become an instrument of political manipulation rather than an instrument of righteousness and godliness which it is meant to be. So much energy is dissipated in the pursuit of religion but with little or no effort at attaining godliness.

Cultural, Tribal, Religious and Social Organisations as Impediments

Rather than promote transparency, accountability and good governance, cultural, tribal, religious and social organisations have largely constituted themselves into limiting factors in the fight against corruption and this can be seen in a number of ways. A few examples will suffice:

1. ***Celebration of Corruption*** – These organisations celebrate corruption by conferring awards and titles on people without interrogating their sources of sudden wealth. What this does to the psyche of society is a re-enforcement of corruption as a sure means to fame, honour and religious cum social ascendancy. Such organizations go to any length to defend such persons whenever they are being investigated by anti-corruption agencies, usually claiming they are victims of political witch hunt. Corruption has now become a norm and many tend to see corrupt enrichment as a blessing from God and those who oppose it as enemies of progress.
2. ***Stereotyping of Corruption*** – We have seen instances where religious, ethnic or political sentiments are instigated by communities and groups to rationalise why certain persons should not be investigated and prosecuted for corruption.
3. ***Non-Action Against Corruption*** – Communities and organisations no longer hold their members accountable. As long as these communities and groups are benefitting from the proceeds of corruption from their members, they see no problem with such stolen money. The point has to be stressed here that the philosophy of the end justifying the means is neither tenable nor applicable to corruption. Those who are inhumanely denied their rights of access to qualitative services as and when needed and in return are offered placatory consolations in the guise of charity, by the very

perpetrators of this inhumanity, must realize that they are not being done any favour.

4. ***Weak Preaching Against Corruption*** - Since all religions abhor evil and corruption, how much effort is being put into preaching against corruption. People who use proceeds of corruption to build mosques and churches seem to enjoy tremendous public applause and recognition. It is difficult to hear that the integrity of such people has been questioned or that their offers of building places of worship have been rejected for lack of integrity.
5. ***Unnecessary Demands on Office Holders*** - Communities and organisations see the election or appointment of their members as an opportunity for them to take their "turn" in eating the national cake. As a result, tremendous pressure is brought on such office holders, who most times, indulge in corrupt acts in order to meet such demands.

Restoring and Inculcating our Value System

It is clear from our evaluation that the erosion and failure of our value system is primarily responsible for the inability of cultural, tribal, religious and social organisations to be active agents of the anti-corruption campaign. The restoration and inculcation of our cherished values have therefore become critical. Here are some recommendations:

1. ***Responsible Family Upbringing and Foundation*** - family should be the first point of instilling moral and social values in the child. Families should be encouraged not to abdicate this important responsibility. Building strong families will ensure the emergence of strong societies.
2. ***Cultural Re-Orientation*** - Cultural revival is necessary to strengthen our values and counter alien cultures that have invaded our societies. It is necessary to use our well-established culture to reconnect people back to their roots which are known to encourage respect for elders, honesty, hardwork, fear of God and being our brothers' keepers among other values.
3. ***Pursue Functional Education*** - There is need to focus and emphasize value-based education policy that promotes self-reliance, skills development, dignity of labour and communal responsibility. This is particularly necessary in view of massive youth unemployment, frustrations and restiveness.
4. ***Sound Religious and Moral Teachings*** - Our religious institutions must be encouraged to provide spiritual guidance and teach sound doctrines. They should preach and encourage religious tolerance, mutual respect and the sanctity of human life. There is also the need to de-emphasize materialism, bigotry and religiosity, and encourage godliness, godly

contentment and impactful life. Inter-faith dialogue and action should be encouraged at all levels to bring about better understanding and synergy in fighting the ills of society.

5. ***Vibrant and Responsible Media*** – In all these, the role of the media, as watch-dog of the society, cannot be overlooked. The media must ensure objective and responsible reportage of issues and set agenda for healthy conversation and national discourse on issues that promote transparency, accountability and inclusive governance. Media content should promote our core values, unity and integration. Allow freedom of speech as guaranteed by the constitution but ensure responsible use of the social media in order to safeguard our national security.
6. ***Entrench a Just and Robust Reward System*** - To appropriately sanction all forms of corruption and dishonesty, and handsomely reward integrity, hardwork and excellence.
7. ***Enthroned Political Culture and Practice*** – to encourage selfless service, the rule of law, exemplary leadership, building of strong democratic institutions and mentoring of younger generation for transparent and accountable leadership. Again, government at all levels must enhance their standard of accountability by ensuring greater openness and willingness to punish those who violate public trust.

Role of the National Orientation Agency (NOA)

Given our diversities, Nigeria has identified and enshrined seven core values in Section 23 of the 1999 Constitution as amended. These core values are **Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self-Reliance and Patriotism**. The objective is to give Nigerians a common cultural identity and a trajectory for achieving national development.

The National Orientation Agency (NOA) is using its vast and elaborate grassroots structure to inculcate these values most especially in primary and secondary schools through the establishment of **Integrity Clubs** in furtherance of the National Policy on Ethics and Integrity. At the tertiary level, we have continued to engage with students in our “**Campus Focus**” programme which is aimed at promoting education with character as a way of dealing with the myriad of social vices on our campuses.

The National Policy on Ethics and Integrity a joint effort of the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (OSGF), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and NOA was designed and presented for approval to the Federal Executive Council by the NOA and ICPC. Since its approval by FEC, the NOA alongside the ICPC have organized Zonal Town Hall sensitization meetings to get stakeholder buy-in for

of Traditional Rulers in Nigeria. The NOA in partnership with ICPC and other stakeholders is taking the policy to the grassroots through Focus Group Discussions, Outdoor Orientation and Sensitization.

The NOA is also working with the ICPC to track constituency projects implementation across Nigeria. This effort we believe will also reduce the challenges of low or none implementation of constituency projects. Very often proceeds corruptly acquired are channelled into elections. We will continue to work with ICPC to ensure that constituency project funds are applied correctly.

As we approach the 2023 general election, we are intensifying our sensitization campaign against election malpractices most especially vote buying and selling. Also as part of our mandate we established what we call Local Government Assembly, which is designed to elicit buy-in for government initiative, especially in the fight against corruption. This corruption awareness at the rural level is a key step towards weakening the support base of corruption in the country and strengthening accountability in both politics and governance.

In addition to all these, we are collaborating and synergizing with other anti-corruption agencies and civil society organisations to empower citizens to demand for accountability and responsible governance at all levels of society.

Conclusion

It is necessary to re-state that the fight against corruption should not be left to government alone. Both state and non-state actors have critical roles to play in addressing the menace of corruption in Nigeria. Cultural, tribal, religious and cultural organisations are key in this campaign. Unfortunately, rather than be in the vanguard of this campaign, they have become serious impediments in the fight against corruption by providing safe haven for corrupt people. The near total collapse of our value system has been identified as a major contributing factor. To address this, this paper has recommended ways in which our value system can be restored and inculcated.

Thank you for listening.