

## Cleansing Nigeria's Corrupt Bureaucracy: The Peril and Promise

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian bureaucracy came under severe ridicule following the discovery and recovery of large-scale looting of government money and illicit assets by civil servants recently. The discoveries were made by the various federal government anticorruption Agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB). This is in spite of the Zero tolerance stance of the Muhammadu Buhari government for corruption in the civil service since it came to power about two year ago. Is it possible for a civil service bedevilled by this magnitude of corruption to be effective and efficient, especially in the area of national development? This paper holds the view that the government should ensure that its on-going efforts to cleanse the country's civil service of the mess of corruption is intensified and pursued to the letter with the initiation of more stringent cleansing measures as well as providing adequate political will to crush the menace of corruption in the civil service.

**Keywords:** Bureaucratic Corruption, Civil Service, Cleansing, National Development and Leadership

### **Introduction**

The bureaucracy or Civil Service of any country is often considered as the primary vehicle of public administration. It is so important that it drives the developmental process particularly in developing countries of the world. The civil service of any country is placed in strategic and esteemed position to formulate and implement national development plans among other businesses of government. The civil service (operations) of the developing countries of the world are most times languishing in corrupt practices and unethical activities. The Nigerian civil servants have become neck-deep in corruption to the extent that they have engaged themselves in a large-scale looting of the financial resources of the country. It is now clear that it is not only politicians that have been stealing the country's fund but civil servants have become collaborators, path finder and partner in progress in the business of corruption.

Therefore, the Nigerian Civil Service, as presently constituted cannot be the true driver of development. Recently, following the Muhammadu Buhari administration's onslaught against

corruption, it has been discovered that the culture of graft and impunity have been firmly and widely entrenched in the nation's civil service. Large sums of stolen government money are now being discovered and recovered from civil servants, courtesy of the whistle-blowers policy of the government (Akinaso 2016 and Bulusson 2017). This paper therefore expresses the view that the government's declared war on corruption in the public service generally is facing a lot of problems and prospects. In order to address this issue, the paper is divided into five parts. The first part discusses a holistic view of the place of the Nigerian Civil service. The second part examined the civil service core values; the third part discussed the history and depth of the corruption in the civil service. The need to cleanse the Nigerian civil service from corruption in order to attain national development forms the fourth part while the fifth part is the concluding remarks.

### **Civil Service Core Values**

The Civil Service is an integral and key part of the government of any country. It supports the Government of the day in developing and implementing its policies, and in delivering public services. Civil servants are accountable to Ministers who in turn are accountable to the presidency and the country at large. Civil servants are appointed on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition and are expected to carry out roles with dedication and a commitment to the Civil Service and its core values. These core values include; integrity (which means putting the obligations of public service above any personal interests), honesty (which means truthful and openness), objectivity (which means basing all advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence) and impartiality (which means acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving equally well Governments of different political persuasions) (Civil Service Commission 2010; Foote and Clinger 2017).

These core values support good governance and ensure the achievement of the highest possible standards in all Civil Service delivery. This in turn helps the Civil Service to gain and retain the respect of Ministers, Parliament, the public and its customers. Therefore the following Standards of behaviour are essential for the outright cleansing of the civil service. Civil servants must always act in a way that is professional and that deserves and retains the confidence of all those with whom they have dealings, the fiduciary obligations must be carried out responsibly (that is making sure public money and other resources are used properly and efficiently handled). Meyer Sahling and Mikkelsen (2016) also noted that the official records must be kept accurately and handle information as openly as possible within the legal framework, comply with the law and uphold the administration of justice. The misuse of official position, for example by using information acquired in the course of the official duties to further private interests or those of others is unacceptable. Undue gifts or hospitality must not be accepted as well as receiving other benefits from anyone which might reasonably be seen to compromise the personal judgment or integrity of the civil servant.

Honesty must be adhered to by setting out the facts and relevant issues truthfully, and correct any errors as soon as possible. Resources should be used only for the authorized public purposes for which they are provided (Thaler and Helmig 2016; Hensell 2016; Zafarullah 2016).

The Ministers, Parliament or others must not be deceived or knowingly misled. The objectivity in providing information and advice, including advice to Political leaders, Ministers, on the basis of the evidence, and accurately presenting the options and facts is a standard core value which must not be compromised. Decisions should be taken on the merits of the case and due account of expert and professional advice. Inconvenient facts or relevant considerations which may jeopardise good governance when providing advice or making decisions must not be ignored.

Also, civil servants in the implementation of policies must not be frustrated once decisions are taken by declining to take, or abstaining from action which flows from those decisions. Thaler and Helmig (2016) further noted that impartiality must be ensured in carrying out all responsibilities in a fair, just and equitable way that reflects the Civil Service commitments to equality and diversity. Therefore actions for unjustifiable favour or discrimination against particular individual or interest must not be allowed. Political impartiality as well must be ensured in serving the Government. Whatever the political orientation of the civil servant may be or personal political beliefs are political impartiality must be ensured. Also actions in a way that is determined by party political or the use of official resources for political party purposes must not be performed. Therefore personal political views must not be used to determine any advice or actions to render.

### **The Civil Service and National Development**

The civil service or bureaucracy of any country is an important institution of government. The 1999 constitution of Nigeria section 318 sub-section (1) defines the Nigerian civil service as:

Service of the federation (State) in a civil Capacity as staff of the office of the President (Governor), the vice President, (Deputy Governor) a ministry or department of the government of the federation (State) assigned with the responsibility for any business of the government of the federation (State)

From the definition of civil service above, it is clear that the civil service of any country is the primary and primate instrument of the government of the country. In view of the importance of the civil service to any country, the Nigerian constitution has bestowed on government, the duty of promoting the political, economic, social, education, foreign policy and environmental objectives of the country. The process of formulating and implementing these objectives is called governance, while the organ employed for such purpose is the civil service (Olagunju, 2006; Schuster, 2016; Chan, 2016). Therefore, the role of the civil service cannot be divorced from the political, institutional and economic development of the country. From early 1979, the role of the Nigerian civil service has had to adapt to modern challenges of managing an ailing economy, through the Structural Adjustment Programme, rationalization, nationalization among others (Olagunju, 2006; Opawole, and Jagboro, 2016).

The civil service also prepares the various national development plans and the national budgets. Indeed, the Nigerian civil service is strategically placed to be the major driver of national development since inception. At independence, the federal and the then regional civil

services followed the British West Minister mode of operation characterized by neutral, efficient administrative corps that drove the rapid growth witnessed in the 1950's and 1960s. For example, the then Western Region civil service of the 1950s under the Late Simeon Adebo, a prominent colonial civil servant prepared and implemented the first, second and third national development plans for the country.

By the virtue of the position of the civil service in national development, it becomes imperative for civil servants to be honest, dedicated and prudent managers of the nation's resources. It is general to assert that each successive government in Nigeria since the attaining of independence in 1960, relies largely on the civil service system for the implementation of its political, social and economic programmes for the maximum good of the greatest number of its citizenry (Bur, 1992) The pivoted role of the civil service in national development can therefore not be overstressed.

According to the federal government Act of parliament on the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission 2000, corruption connotes impropriety and encompasses all forms of reprehensible, indecorous and infamous conduct in the performance of some official and non-official responsibilities. Specifically, Lipset and Lenz (2000) describe corruption as the efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means, private gain at public expense; or a misuse of public power for private benefit. It is an effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private benefit at public expense.

### **Corruption in the Nigerian Civil Service**

The Nigerian civil service since its inception had been influenced by three major political dispensations. These are the Colonial, Military and Civilian government. The level and magnitude of corruption in the service also varied under each regime. Overall, the integrity of the Nigerian civil service had declined over the years as a result of corruption. The Nigerian civil servants of the colonial era were people trained to lead as well as conform, trained for responsibility and leadership for danger and physical hardship, imbued with patriotism and a strong sense of duty. In other words, they were men with the highest sense of mission, dedication, discipline and motivation, prepared to make sacrifice and put with the strain of the hardest work and the greatest responsibilities (Ipinlaye 2006; Hope Sr, 2017a).

However, after independence and after a short period of civil rule, came many years of military rule. During military regimes, the Nigerian civil service became inept, corrupt and highly undisciplined. It became a prominent partner in the kleptocracy that characterized military administration. Through the bureaucracy, the political leadership under the military used the civil service as machinery for acquiring wealth and privileges, its main occupation being accumulation of private property at the expense of the nation (Adetoye, 2006). The long years of military rule has a serious negative effect on the civil service (Hope Sr, 2017a). The military generally had impatience for due process. Because the military had little or no administrative experience, they relied heavily on the on the advice and direction of the civil servants thereby exposing civil servants to the corruptive influence of the power of non-accountability.

Corruption has become more or less a permanent problem in the Nigerian civil service. Bureaucratic corruption in Nigerian continues to grow by leaps and bounds. So many civil servants have defrauded and embezzled government money. Most of them would demand for money before rendering service to the members of the public (Omosho, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, and Palifka, 2016; Hope Sr, 2017b). As far back as 1987, the Political Bureau noted the invincibility of corruption in the public service thus:

Corruption has become a household word in the Nigerian society from the highest levels of the Political and business elites to the ordinary person in the village. Its multi-farious manifestation includes the inflation of government contracts in return for kickbacks, frauds and falsification of accounts in the public service (FRN, 1987).

Therefore, when the country returned to civil rule, corruption became firmly entrenched and deepened into full scale dimension in the civil service. At the return of the country to civil rule in 1999, the Nigerian civil service had become neck-deep in corruption. The then President Olusegun Obasanjo, at the inception of his administration on May 29th 1999 observed that:

Government and all its agencies had become thoroughly corrupt and reckless. Members of the public had to bribe their way through in Ministries and Parastatals to get attention and one government agency had to bribe another government agency to obtain the release of their statutory allocation of funds. The impact of official corruption is so rampant and has earned Nigeria a very bad image at home and abroad. Besides, it has distorted and retrogresses development. Our infrastructures, NEPA, NITEL, Roads, Railways Education, Housing and other social Sciences were allowed to decay and collapse (Obasanjo's Inaugural Speech 1999).

However, during the administration of the same government, the phenomenon of corruption escalated among civil servants. This partly accounts, for example, for hundreds of billions of naira spent on unseen roads across the country. Other infrastructure, such as water, electricity etc remain pipe drains. Having hit the nadir of economic disillusionment, self-help by privileged top civil servants remains the dominant culture, thus ingraining deeper the cankerworm of corruption, fraud and such other vices (Omosho, 2006; Meyer Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).

The Umoru Ya'radua government that succeeded Obasanjo also emphasized Zero tolerance for corruption in the civil service. As Yaradua acknowledges in his inaugural address;

Over the past eight years Nigerians have reached a national Consensus in at least four areas: to deepen democracy and the rule of laws; build on economy driven primarily by the private sector, not government; display Zero tolerance for corruption in all its forms, and finally, restructure and staff our government to ensure efficiency and good governance. I commit myself to these tasks (Yaradua, 2009).

However in continuation of this government under President Goodluck Jonathan, corruption in the civil service assumed an unprecedented dimension until the coming on board of another civilian government of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. His government has been waging a fierce war on corruption in the civil service since coming into power. Following the government's onslaught against corruption, the nation was baffled by the large-scale corruption uncovered in the civil service (Federal Ministry of Finance 2017; Akinnaso 2016). Large sums of stolen government money and illicit assets were recovered and forfeited by civil servants.

Recent findings in the civil service offer only a glimpse into a gigantic machinery of graft, indolence and privilege civil servants have built for themselves over the years. From a sole female officer, a king's ransoms of sixty-two (62) houses were seized by the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). Shortly before this, forty (40) vehicles allegedly stolen by some retired Directors of the Water Resources Ministry had been similarly impounded. Some one hundred and twenty-four (124) vehicles illegally acquired were recovered by the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2016. Also revealed by the Minister of Information and Culture, the sum of one hundred and fifty-one million United States of America dollars (\$151 million) and another eight billion Naira (8 billion Naira) were deposited in some faceless bureaucrats, but mercifully recovered, courtesy of whistle blowers (The Punch Newspaper, March 8, 2017).

Civil servants also disgorged N1.6 billion stolen funds in 2016 while N195 billion of pension funds once incredible vanished under a task force that was, ironically, set up to stop the plunder. The stolen money recovered from civil servants were so much that the Chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission, Dr. Ekpo Nta marveled at the stupendous wealth amassed by some civil servants and observed that some civil servants are even richer than their organizations (Punch, March 8, 2017). Also the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) announced the forfeiture of 47 cars to the federal government by a former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Power (Daily Trust March, 6th 2017).

Undaunted by the anti-corruption credentials of the current government, civil servants, in connivance with Politicians and crony-contractors have continued to "Pad" the federal budget. Similarly, it is common knowledge today that assets declarations by Public officers are no longer the reliable means of ensuring transparency in the civil service. A large number of civil servants have been discovered to falsely declare their assets with the Code of Conduct Bureau. This has led to large-scale forfeiture of illicit money and assets by many civil servants (Punch, March 8, 2017). Another avenue of corruption is the common incidences of "ghost workers" in the civil service. In year 2013, it was reported that about 50,000 fictitious workers were discovered and in year 2014, about 60,000 "ghost workers" were also discovered in the federal service. There are many other cases of corruption under investigation by the various government anti-corruption Agencies involving civil servants today.

### **Cleansing the Corrupt Nigerian Civil Service: Peril and Promise**

From the above analysis of the level and magnitude of corruption in the civil service, it becomes clear that corruption has become more or less a permanent problem in the history of

the Nigerian civil service. It must be noted that it is not possible for a civil service bedeviled by this dept of corruption to be effective and efficient enough to be a driver of national development as expected of any civil service. There is no doubt that the present Muhammadu Buhari government has demonstrated its determination to uproot the culture of graft and impunity in the civil service.

However, the war against bureaucratic corruption should introduce a civil service reform with emphasis on the imposition of severe punishment to deter future occurrences as a way of stamping out corruption in the public service generally. Corrupt civil servants should be sent to jail of long terms as was the case in India and Romania, where about 1,170 cases of graft by public servants have been prosecuted in the last three years (Taiwo 2015; Brewer and Kellough, 2016; Cohen 2016). The Nigerian Judiciary might be an obstacle in this regard, if it does not give speedy trials to corruption cases and jail corrupt civil servants who are found guilty of corrupt practices.

In view of the height of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria, waging a successful war against this culture of graft and impunity is no doubt a herculean task. This is because discovery of various corrupt practices and the illicit wealth acquired in this regard have been cleverly concealed by the corrupt civil servants (Taiwo, 2015). This is why the recently introduced whistle-blowing policy of the government becomes appropriate. It has yielded positive outcomes leading to the discovery and recovery of a lot of illicit assets and money from civil servants.

As noted earlier, the acquisition of illicit assets by civil servants has been mind-boggling in recent years. This is an indication that the assets declaration law is very weak. The Code of Conduct Bureau which is the body charged with the responsibility of verifying the authenticity of assets of civil servant has not prosecuted many civil servants. The law on assets declaration has not been able to effectively trace illicit properties acquired by civil servants in the names of their extended family members. A major challenge in this area is that assets declaration exercises by bureaucrats are no longer a reliable means of ensuring transparency in the civil service. Civil servants adopt anticipatory declaration of assets they expect to use stolen public funds to acquire. They also mislead the Code of Conduct Bureau on the correct values and qualities of assets they declare.

The recently introduced directive by the minister of Finance in an official circular to all ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAS) on the preparation of inventory of all fixed assets of their offices is a welcome development. The directive requires that all their assets must be accessible for physical inspection and any asset not disposed of in accordance with financial requirements will be deemed to have been illegally withheld or converted. There is also provision for Assets Tracking and Management Project and the creation of the Asset Register at the Ministry. The Asset register would afford the government the opportunity to know and monitor, in real time, online information on the inventory of Government Assets. Regular audit exercises in all the Ministries, Departments and Agencies should be carried out to ensure accountability in the civil service of the country.

The various government anti-corruption Agencies such as the Code of Conduct Bureau, (CCB) the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial

Crimes Commission (EFCC) should be well-equipped and motivated to intensify their efforts to fight the war against corruption without fear or favour. The activities and official assignments of officials of these anti-corruption Agencies must be strictly monitored for compliance with the ethics of their profession as anti-corruption fighters. This is because it is ironical to learn from the Acting Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Mr Ibrahim Maguthat some of the officials of the commissions are currently being prosecuted for corruption in various courts of law across the country (The Sun, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2017). The issue of “ghost workers” which has become one of the major sources of corruption in the civil service should be tackled decisively through regular staff auditing and unified salary system. Any official involved in this act should be severely punished to deter future occurrence. They should be prosecuted and jailed if found guilty.

Leadership by example, and not by precept, will go a long way to re-oriented the followership in the civil service. If the leadership can be transparent and honest and play according to the rules of democracy, then, a development-oriented civil service will be attainable. The anti-corruption law, if well applied, without considering any sacred cow, has the capacity to make civil servants eschew corruption, graft and dirty deals (Adetoye, 2006; Cohen, 2016; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Hope Sr, 2017b).

### **Conclusion**

This paper traced the history of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria since independence. It also affirmed that despite the various pronouncements of different regimes to fight corruption in the civil service, the culture of graft and impurity had grown into large-scale corruption. This led to the discovery and recovery of illicit wealth and assets looted by civil servants in recent times in the administration of President Mohammadu Buhari’s total war on corruption in the public service generally.

Corruptions in terms of illicit wealth accumulation, excessive administrative bottle neck, bribery, patronage politics, patrimonial attachment, patron-client politics, falsification of public document for private use and diversion of fund of unspent budgets at the end of the budget year to private pockets in conjunction with concerned politicians. The civil service should be a bridge between the government and the service rendered to the public so that policy implementation will be effective. This is not the case in Nigeria and some other developing politics due to lack of strict adherence to the ethos of the civil service.

The developed countries of the world have to a large extent cleansed their bureaucracy of corruption and its related practices. This is why there is an easy flow of policy document from the policy makers to the implementers without undue delay, padding, manoeuvring, gerrymandering and distortion of the original contents of the documents. For development to be more pronounced, consistent, rapid and effective in the developing countries of the world, there must be a right dose of political will to implement public policies, consistent cleansing of corrupt civil servants and adequate punitive measures must also be mete out to erring officers.

The paper noted as well that there is no civil service that is bedevilled by this level of corruption as the case in Nigeria today that can effectively perform its role as the driver of



economic and national development in a developing country such as Nigeria. It also noted that the Muhammadu Buhari administration's onslaught against corruption must be pursued with the required political will in order to uproot the entrenched culture of graft and impurity in the nation's civil service. This is because the fight against corruption is usually a herculean task which must not be compromised in order to cleanse the corrupt Nigerian bureaucracy and ensure rapid national development.

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