

Effect of Bureaucratic Corruption and Lack of Public Accountability on Grassroots Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Accountability is one of the most important ethical values that are required of all bureaucrats. Public confidence in most of the bureaucrats in Nigeria is low and they are often objects of derision, presented as greedy and corrupt. This paper seeks to identify the effect of bureaucratic corruption and lack of public accountability on grassroots transformation in Nigeria. The paper finds among others that bureaucratic corruption and lack of public accountability has negative effect on the effective grassroots transformation in Nigeria. It then concludes that a reduction in the level of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria will lead to a corresponding increase in public accountability by the public servants thereby boosting grassroots development. The paper recommends that Nigerian bureaucracies should be modified to accommodate the influx of change in ideas, culture and values, and adapt to new situations or changing circumstances. Again, grassroots transformation will be enhanced through proper accountability if the immunity clause in the constitution is removed for both the bureaucrats and political class in Nigerian.

Key Words: Bureaucratic Corruption; Accountability; Public Service; Bureaucracy; Grassroots Transformation.

Introduction

One of the most important and significant features of most modern societies today is the emergence of a powerful state bureaucracy. This has raised the issue of bureaucratic power which can be abused by the bureaucrats, either for selfish ends or in the course of their dealing with private citizens. In regard to this latter issue, attention is usually drawn to the weak position of the citizens in relation to the powerful state bureaucracy. It is the position of Adamolekun (2002) that the individuals who exercise power on behalf of the state must be accountable for the actions they take on behalf of the state.

The overbearing power of public bureaucracy makes it the guide and direction of totality of government's business and activities.

Bureaucracy now becomes almost all-knowing and everywhere in handling of the business activities of governments both the implementation and, surprisingly, formulation of public policy – a situation that strengthens the bureaucracy and widens its sphere of operation (Arowolo, 2010). This observation is in tandem with the view of Krieger (1987:1) that “bureaucracy is a form of government, government by officials, characterized by tendency to meddle, to exceed its proper function”.

The effects of unethical activities on nation's grassroots transformation and development cannot be easily estimated in Nigeria. Corruption which is one aspect of unethical behaviour could also be expected to reduce growth by lowering the quality of public infrastructure and services, decreasing tax revenues and causing talented employees to engage in rent-seeking rather than productive activities (Ugwu, 2011). Corruption has really affected many of the business climates in Nigeria. Corruption disrupts governance, reduces the provisions of services by the government and its institutions. Impaired governance in turn reduces capital and public trust in governance institution; this reduces the public fund available to support effective economic, social, political and technological growth programmes (Bichi, 2006). It is important that government should implement a transparent regulatory framework governing public safety, public infrastructure and grassroots transformation.

Deriving from the above, it should be realized that accountability is essential for the efficient functioning of the bureaucracy especially as it is the primary and major implementation arm of government. Accountability acts as a quality control device for the public service and so the public as citizens and consumers in the public realm can expect to receive the best service. Accountability also underscores the superiority of the public-will over private interests of those expected to serve and ensures that the public servants behave according to the ethics of their profession. The public expects nothing more or less and it is in this regard that the argument has been made that where professional ethics and accountability have been eroded or abandoned, the servants become the master and corruption thrives (Agara and Omobolaji, 2009). In the view of Olowu (2002), accountability is very necessary now especially in the face of a sharp decline in resources available to most African states and aggravated by the rising expectations of the citizens which has further imposed tremendous pressure on governments to ensure that they give the citizens minimum possible value for their money.

Bureaucratic corruption has proved ubiquitous mixing with individual blood and societal life, where officials not only personalize public office but also personify it. The work ethics has been severely undermined by the get-rich-quick syndrome from corruption (Arowolo, 2010). Onimode (2001:3) notes that “not only the officials were corrupt but corruption was official, and ‘lootocracy’ became a new diatribe for the governance on the continent”.

In spite of numerous positive connotations of bureaucracy, there still exist some important negative connotations from the standpoint of modern management (Aluko and Adesopo, 2004). From the Marxists’ point of view, bureaucracies are characterized by incompetent officials, fear of responsibility and process of self aggrandizement. In Nigeria, bureaucratic services have been slowly metamorphosed into an intricate network of favours provided only in exchange for some other kinds of favours given or expected. Because the Nigerian society has been excessively corrupt, the bureaucrats too have grown corruptible and are themselves corrupt. Thus, in Nigeria, corruption is a permanent integral feature of bureaucracy. It is therefore not unusual to find that public accountability has been slaughtered on the altars of bureaucratic corruption, hence the crux of this paper.

The objective of the study is to examine the impact of bureaucratic corruption and lack of public accountability on grassroots transformation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between the Nigerian state (Arowolo, 2010) and the public bureaucracy demands an employment of Public Choice Theory. Therefore, the public choice theory was adopted for this study. Buchanan and Tullock (1962) are the primary developers of Public Choice Theory. This theory contends that the rules that are ultimately aimed at regulating and conditioning the relationship between entrepreneurship and bureaucracy on the one hand and between groups of individuals on the other should be an outgrowth of the society (Mbaku, 1992). The theory emphasizes public input in rules governing individuals and the society. Once constitutional rules have been selected and adopted and a government established, political conditions will try to use government to redistribute income and wealth in their favour (Mbaku, 1992).

Rules that regulate the activities of individuals within a society matter and are a major determinant of how individuals and organizations behave. The behaviour of bureaucrats (bureaucracy) and the public servants (public service) can be analyzed effectively only within the context of existing rules. Thus, without a closer understanding of a

country’s law and institutions, any effort to analyze or understand corruption within that society would be futile. Rules define how individuals can interact with each other, provide a means for the statement of conflict, and generally place constraints on individual behaviour. The readiness of the stakeholders to play according to the rules often depends on the ability of the state to ensure compliance (Mbaku, 1992).

Public choice theory was summarized as follows:

It is the behaviour of public sector bureaucrats which is at the heart of public choice theory. While they are supposed to work in the public interest, putting into practice the policies of government as efficiently and effectively as possible, public choice theorists see bureaucrats as self-interested utility-maximizers, motivated by such factors as: "salary, perquisites of the office, public reputation, power, patronage... and -the ease of managing the bureau." (Niskanen, 1973: 87).

Public choice theory is relevant to this study because the Nigerian state and the bureaucracy capitalize on the weakness and softness of the structure and the fragility of the existing rules to manipulate the teeming ignorant population, and increase their economic base through advantage of venality. Subscribing to this assertion, Amuwo (1989) argued that the civil service is an important linkage in the exploitation of the Nigerian economy and resources by foreign capital. It constantly plays a collaborationist role in this direction. At the heart of all public choice theories then is the notion that an official at any level be they in the public or private sector, acts at least partly in his own self-interest, and some officials are motivated solely by their own self-interest (Downs, 1967).

Bureaucratic Corruption, Public Accountability and Grassroots Transformation: A Conceptual Analysis

The word '*bureaucracy*' originated from the word '*bureau*', used from the early 18th century in Western Europe not just to refer to a

writing desk, but to an office, that is, a workplace, where officials worked. The original French meaning of the word '*bureau*' was the baize used to cover desks. The suffix '*Cracy*' came from the Greek word '*kratia*' or '*Katos*', which means '*power*' or '*rule*' (Arowolo, 2010; Wikipedia, 2008).

Bureaucracy is nonetheless one concept that relatively enjoys consensus in terms of definition (Obagbinoko, 2006). The principle of social organization which characterizes the twentieth-century industrial societies is '*rational coordination*' otherwise known as '*Bureaucracy*' (Aluko and Adesopo, 2004). The type of organization designed to accomplish large-scale administrative tasks by coordinating the work of many people systematically is called a bureaucracy (Blau and Meyer, 1990).

Corruption in developing countries and Nigeria in particular is often believed to arise from the class or conflict between traditional values and the imported norms that accompany modernization and socio-political development. It is seen by some scholars, then, as an unavoidable outcome of modernization and development (Alam, 1989; Bayley, 1966). Bayley (1966:720) argues that "corruption, while being tied particularly to the act of bribery, is a general term covering the misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gain, which need not be monetary". Corruption has broadly been defined as a perversion or a change from good to bad. Specifically, corruption or corrupt behaviour involves the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit (Dike, 2008). Corruption is efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means; private gain at public expense; or a misuse of public power for private benefit (Lipset and Lenz, 2000).

Olowu (1983) sees bureaucratic corruption as an extension into the public sector of the widespread political corruption which pervades the polity of all developing countries, in historical and contemporary periods. According to him, countries at this stage of development, government property is regarded as the spoils for those fortunate enough to be in government at any point in time.

Hope (1983) sees bureaucratic corruption as the utilization of bureaucratic official positions for private gain. It is the

corruption by officials in public offices who are not vocationally politicians but who are aided and abetted by corrupt politicians and corrupt political system. Leff (1964:8) in his definition of corruption includes “bribery to obtain foreign exchange, import, export, investment or production licenses, or to avoid paying his office as a business from which he is able to extract extra-legal income. As a result, the civil servants total compensation “does not depend on an ethical evaluation of his usefulness for the common good but precisely upon the market situation and his talents for finding the point of maximal gain on the public’s demand curve” (Klaveren, 1990:26).

Bureaucratic corruption occurs in the public administration or the implementation end of politics. This kind of corruption has been branded low level and street level. It is the kind of corruption the citizens encounter daily at places like the hospitals, schools, police stations, immigration offices and other public offices (Arowolo, 2010).

Public Accountability

Accountability is a major instrument in instilling public trust or confidence in any organizational set up (Uguru, 2004). Any organization that lacks a good system of accountability will hardly accomplish its goals. It is therefore imperative that someone has to answer for the success or failure of an organizational set up which the public service is one (Onu, 2003).

Accountability can be defined as the

obligation of anyone handling resources, public office or other position of trust to report on the intended use of the resources of the designated office (UN DESA DPADM, 2004). Accountability is all about being answerable to those who have invested their trust, faith and resources in you (Achua, 2009). It is expected to make public officials and their activities easy to understand and thus, it contributes to enhancing governmental responsiveness, legitimacy and the improvement of policy implementation of government. In leadership roles, accountability is the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions, and policies including the administration, governance and implementation within the scope of the role or employment position and encompassing the obligation to report, explain

and be answerable for resulting consequences. Thus, Barker (2000) defines governmental (public) accountability as the duty of public officials to report their actions to the citizens, and the right of the citizens to take action against those officials whose conduct, the citizens consider unsatisfactory.

Accountability is one of the most important ethical values that are required of all politicians and bureaucrats in underpinning governance that is in the public interest (Achua, 2009).

Historically, African top leaderships were somehow not accountable and ruled with impunity, especially with regard to the management of public finances. The expectation of Africans with regard to their leaders is also broadly not one that expects altruism to drive decision-making; opts for the second best of hanging around to see what they can gain directly for themselves and their families. This may now be changing with expectations driven by global imperatives, although slowly. An impressive thing about many public figures in some Asian countries when they are found to have abused public trust is their public demonstrations of regret, contrition, shame and even tears before cameras. Some even commit suicide to avoid public shame (Achua, 2009). For example, Roh Moo-hyun, a former South Korean leader, committed suicide on May 23, 2009 to spare those close to him additional grief as a result of allegations against him for accepting bribe of some \$6 million from a business man while in office (The Nation, 2009a). These cultures of remorse and contrition which serve as institutional glue that bind the society and politics together do not yet exist in Africa, where attitudes are still quite braze. In Nigeria, for instance, a culture of impunity seems to reign supreme and shamelessness of the most object type is considered a national virtue particularly among the political class (The Nation, 2009b). Consequently, public confidence in most of the leaders is low and they are often objects of derision, presented as greedy, corrupt and oppressive around the world (Achua, 2009).

Judging from the avalanche of measures taken by the government to fight corruption and instill a high sense of accountability, transparency and integrity, one expected a major success in this area. However, the fight seems to have been lost because both the bureaucrats and

the politicians had no commitment to the cause. One credible measure of judging how far the fight went is Nigeria's ranking on the corruption index of the Transparency International. Transparency International has persistently rated Nigeria among the most corrupt nations in the world. For instance, the 1996 study of corruption by Transparency International and Goettingen University ranked Nigeria as the most corrupt nation, among 54 nations listed in the study, with Pakistan as the second highest (Moore, 1997). The 1998 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranked Nigeria, 81 out of the 85 countries pooled (Lipset and Lenz, 2000). And in the 2001 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the image of Nigeria slipped further down South, she ranked 90, out of 91 countries pooled, with second position as most corrupt nation, with Bangladesh coming first. Similarly, the 2007 Transparency International CPI rated Nigeria 147 out of 179 countries under review. CPI released on the 23 September, 2008, at Berlin, Germany, measures the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians. The 2008 CPI scored 180 countries on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean) and Nigeria ranked 121st with a score of 2.7 (Transparency International, 2008).

To promote accounting for effective accountability in the public service, an enabling environment has to be created, particularly adequate pay and other incentives. This is instructive ' because African countries had remove impediments to investment and growth, and also reduce poverty and inequality by promoting good governance in all aspects (Calamitsis, 2001). Public accountability is

probably the most critical areas of reform at the moment, as this would underpin and sustain the implementation of the entire country for faster and more equitable growth.

Grassroots Transformation

The concept of transformation has been defined variously. Some authorities refer to it to mean a change, improvement, advancement, progress of modernization, and so on. For the concept (transformation) to be well understood, it must be focused on a specific sphere of life. Transformation is akin to development, and the transformation process therefore, should basically be for the interest, happiness and well-being of everybody.

Transformation at the individual level means increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and materials well-being (Eguagie and Omoruyi, 2013). Grassroots transformation therefore, has to do with the systemic realization of full potentialities, not only of the individual members within a giving rural settlement, but also of the settlement as a whole. Etuke (2007) noted that transformation is about improving people's quality of life. Grassroots transformation is strong word. It is not a mere palliative – definitely not a slap on the wrist. It is a mandate for the radical, structural and fundamental re-arrangement and re-ordering of the building blocks of the nation (Osisioma, 2012). Osisioma further suggests that grassroots transformation portends a fundamental reappraisal of the basic assumptions that underlie our reforms and developmental efforts. In the language of the scientist, transformation is not just a physical reaction; it is essentially a chemical reaction that will and should alter the essence and substance of our national life.

The essence of grassroots transformation is the eradication of poverty, illiteracy, the provision of basic needs such as food, housing, water, electricity and transportation, the drastic reduction in inequality and the retention of power to take part in the cultural and political life of the community.

The Problem of Bureaucratic Corruption and Lack of Accountability in Nigeria

In Nigeria, many people see corruption as a practical problem involving the “outright theft, embezzlement of funds or other appropriation of state property, nepotism and the granting of favours to personal acquaintances, and the abuse of public authority and position to exact payments and privileges” (Harsch, 1993:33). Also, Nye (1967:419) argues that corruption involves “behaviour which deviates from the normal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (family, close clique), pecuniary or status gain; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence”. In fact, the traditional concept of corruption is rooted in the assumption that it is illegitimate to divert public resources for the private use of those who are trustees, officials.

On that note, McMullan (1979) defines corruption as the acceptance of money or money's worth for doing something that he is under duty to do or to exercise a legitimate discretion for improper reasons.

Bureaucratic corruption is responsible for the systematic collapse of social and economic infrastructure as well as the pauperization of the citizenry besides the fact that it wastes skills and causes capital flight and brain drain (Tell, 2006). In Nigeria, more than twenty three billion naira (W23 billion) was lost in 10 ministries in 2001(Chizea and Iyare, 2006). Meanwhile, Thisday Newspaper had earlier reported that \$42 billion have been lost to capital flight between 1971 and 2001.

While the Prime Minister of India in the 1980's, Rajiv Gandhi publicly stated that he believed 85% of government spending on development within India never reached its intended beneficiaries but was instead lost to corruption at every stage along the way (Gentleman, 2006), a 2004 survey in Chad showed that 99% of money earmarked for moral health clinics by the Ministry of Finance never reached its destination (Collier, 2007). In Uganda, a relatively functional African country, "less than 30 percent of the funds dedicated to primary education was actually reaching schools" in 1998 (Calderisi, 2006:163). This underlies the numerous studies of corruption in developing countries.

The Effect of Bureaucratic Corruption and Lack of Public Accountability on Grassroots Development

Bureaucratic corruption has devastating attendant effects on the development of Nigeria as it reduces government spending on essential basic amenities such as health, education, roads, and housing problems. Literature has shown that corruption has always been the major reasons for military takeover of Nigeria government since 1966 (Eguagie and Omoruyi, 2013). Etuke (2007) argues that corruption is destructive of government structures, ruining the legitimacy of government and rendering government ineffective.

Bureaucratic corruption provides civil servants with the opportunity to raise their compensation above what the law prescribes. The biggest loser from corruption is society as a whole. Corruption allows inefficient producers to remain in business, encourages governments to pursue perverse economic policies, and provides opportunities to bureaucrats and politicians to enrich themselves through extorting bribes from those seeking government favours. Thus, corruption distorts economic incentives, discourages entrepreneurship and slows economic growth (Mbaku, 1980; Gould, 1980). For profit maximizing enterprises faced with ruinous government regulations, bureaucratic corruption can be viewed as a survival mechanism (Harsch, 1993).

The lack of or total disregard for ethical standards throughout the agencies of government and business organizations in Nigeria is one of the causes of bureaucratic corruption. Bowman (1991) states that the issue of ethics in public sector encompasses a broad range, including a stress on obedience to authority, on the necessity of logic in moral reasoning, and on the necessity of putting moral judgment into practice. Unfortunately, many office holders in Nigeria (elected or selected) do not have clear conceptions of the ethical demands of their position, even when they have such are brazenly disregarded. Other factors are poor reward system and greed; Nigeria's rewards system is, perhaps, among the poorest in the world. Nigeria is a society where national priorities are misplaced; meritocracy is discouraged while mediocrity is promoted (Arowolo, 2010). In a situation where the rules are a reflection of elitist section of the society, state actors are bent to manipulate the hitherto

weak, parochial, inefficient and poorly designed constitutional rules to ensure their almost unlimited power and unconstrained access to private exchange. In such economy, resource allocation is usually totally politicized (Arowolo, 2004).

Despite some setbacks and bizarre developments across the African continent, it is becoming clear that the public service means serving the people and not an individual, that the public no longer accepts that weary excuse of the past that one received orders from above to break the law or abuse public trust in any way. So, a culture of public accountability may be beginning to take root. It may lead to increasing calls for greater accountability in particular in the coming years which might be expressed through effective reforms. This is a significant stride but a lot still has to be done because the fact remains that public office holders exhibit a very high propensity to evade accountability in most African countries (Achua, 2009).

Conclusion

The paper examines bureaucratic corruption and the public accountability approach in Nigeria vis a – vis the grassroots transformation. Bureaucratic corruption is an incidence that evolve within a given set of rules; the weaker the rules, the greater the corruptive tendencies and vice versa.

Bureaucratic corruption has a negative effect on the grassroots transformation in Nigeria. This implies that if bureaucratic corruption is eradicated in Nigeria, the grassroots transformation will become effective in terms of achieving its vision and mission. This is corroborated by Arowolo (2010), when he argued that bureaucratic corruption has proved ubiquitous mixing with individual blood and societal life, where officials not only personalize public office but also personify it. He also reiterates that ethics has been severely undermined by the get – rich – quick syndrome from corruption. Klaveren (1990) believes that a corrupt bureaucrat regards his office as a business from which he is able to extract extra-legal income.

The study then concludes that a reduction in the level of bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria will lead to a corresponding increase in public accountability by the public servants thereby boosting grassroots development. And that bureaucratic corruption is surviving in Nigeria as a result of poor reward system and greed from the bureaucrats.

Recommendations

Whether bureaucracy is desirable or not, it had come to stay as it is from all indications an inevitable feature of modern societies. What cannot be avoided or discarded must be accommodated. At best bureaucracies can be modified to reflect the peculiarity and the uniqueness of the Nigerian culture. By doing so, bureaucratic corruption will be reduced to the barest minimum in the Nigerian public service.

Other recommendations are:

1. The political class should accept challenge of building a virile, effective and accountable public service; otherwise the nation would continue to have bureaucrats

as willing collaborators in this well – perfected act of bureaucratic corruption. The establishment of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) widely known as Anti – Corruption Commission, have not really achieve their missions of eradicating corruption in Nigeria. Hence a programme of national regeneration is needed to achieve this. However, it is doubtful if the present political class can really do this due to its class character and interests.

2. To enhance accountability by both the political class and bureaucrats, immunity clause should be removed from the Constitution. This will send all types of sacred-cow syndrome to the grave.

3. Labour remuneration system should not be politicized in Nigeria. The government at all levels should consider at any point in time the economic reality of the country and forces of demand and supply in fixing the reward system of bureaucrats. This will go a long way in reducing the pressure on public officials to undertake in nepotic and corrupt practices to meet their financial obligations.

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