

Opinion – Nigeria’s Readiness to Fight Corruption and End Poverty

Written by Olukayode Bakare

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OLUKAYODE BAKARE, AUG 28 2024

Nigeria has abundant mineral and environmental resources. Despite having Africa’s largest economy and population, as well as enormous natural resources, Nigeria has a poor per capita economic growth rate and persistent poverty. According to the World Bank, Nigeria’s poverty rate was 38.9% in 2023, with an estimated 87 million people living below the poverty line, making it the world’s second-largest impoverished population (after India). The World Bank classifies Nigeria as a middle-income economy with unequal distribution of social welfare benefits between its populous northern and southern regions. The high level of poverty among the people in the country blessed with natural resources has been connected to the endemic corruption.

Endemic corruption has sparked a strong and ongoing national outcry in Nigeria to address poverty and terrible governance. Nigeria’s pervasive corruption and high incidence of poverty during the last two decades have been worrying, with the country ranked 145th out of 180 most corrupt countries. However, to fight this menace, there have been a number of institutional and legal frameworks at the state and federal levels aimed to combat the issue of corruption, which persists despite different anti-corruption programs. According to *Foreign Policy*, “institutional weaknesses and political motivations frequently intersect, allowing corrupt actors to flourish.

The absence of strong governance mechanisms, along with the widespread influence of political networks, hinders efforts to combat corruption and increase transparency”. Thus, the various federal anti-graft agencies in Nigeria, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences (ICPC), have all been portrayed as a ceremonial and political tool used by each ruling party to silence opposition figures accused of corruption. For example, during President Muhammadu Buhari’s previous government (2015-2023), the EFCC failed to unearth frauds and prosecute high-profile money misappropriation cases involving former and current office holders. The case of the previous administration’s Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, led by former Minister Sadiya Umar-Farouk, as well as high-profile corruption scandals, highlight the Nigerian government’s ineptitude and lack of political will to prosecute corrupt government personnel.

Punch reported that “between 2018 and 2023, it was alleged that the sum of N37,170,855,753.44 (\$23,351,512) meant for the children school feedings from the coffers of the Federal Government linked to the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development”. The money was then discovered in 38 commercial bank accounts across the country. It was alleged that the suspect from the ministry transferred N6,746,034,000.00 (\$4,238,000) to Bureau De Change Operators, withdrawn N540,000,000.00 (\$339,239) in cash, spent N288,348,600.00 (\$181,147) on cars, and spent N2,195,115,000.00 (\$1,379,017) on desirable properties in Abuja and Enugu State.

In December 2023, Betta Edun, the former Minister of Humanitarian Affairs of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, allegedly diverted and transferred public funds totaling N585.2 million (\$367,635) to a private account of an official in her ministry. The financial impropriety, which violates the country’s financial regulation act, has resulted in criticism and the suspension of the young minister, but it has remained secretive with regard to prosecution for deterrence purposes, casting doubt on President Tinubu’s commitment and political will to combat corruption.

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Tackling corruption in Nigeria necessitates strong political will and powerful autonomous anti-corruption agencies free of political meddling from the executive branch. The current administration, led by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, does not appear to be making genuine attempts to combat corruption and financial recklessness on a national scale. For example, Adam Oshiomhole, the former Edo State governor and current Senator for the Edo North Senatorial District of Edo State, claimed on national television that any politician who joins the ruling APC party will have their sins forgiven. The Senate House’s previous and current presidents, Lawal Ahmed and Akpabio Godswill, did not take part in indirect elections from their respective constituencies. However, after a lengthy legal battle, manipulation, and counter-judgments, the Nigerian judiciary cleared them in time for the Nigerian legislative chamber elections in February 2023.

In 2022, the Senate Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions examined and called Senator Akpabio Godswill, when he was the Minister of Niger Delta Affairs, regarding the non-payment of N2.2 billion to contractors. Allison Madueke, the former Minister of Petroleum under Goodluck Jonathan’s administration, is also facing corruption charges in the United Kingdom for “£100,000 in cash, chauffeur-driven cars, flights on private jets, luxury holidays for her family, and the use of multiple London properties.” Even James Ibori, an ex-governor who was jailed in the UK for 13 years in 2012 for money-laundering charges, demonstrates the UK’s willingness to combat corruption throughout Africa.

The Nigerian Federal Republican constitution’s doctrine of immunity provision, which typically protects political office holders from prosecution by anti-graft authorities while in office, has impeded Nigeria’s fight against corruption. After leaving office, corrupt politicians frequently seek a court order prohibiting the EFCC from prosecuting or arraigning them for the alleged offence they committed while in government. This presents a significant challenge to democratic accountability in a country suffering with poverty, instability, unemployment, and out-of-school children, and deadly insurgency particularly in Nigeria’s north. Meanwhile, the Nigerian oil sector and the alleged oil subsidy scandals by the former and current administrations, which resulted in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s withdrawal of petrol subsidies, have received no real investigations into the culprits, perpetrators, and recipients of the subsidies over the last decade.

Tinubu’s administration is trying to deal with an already frail economy, which was inherited from the previous administration under General Muhammadu. Thus, the success of Tinubu’s economic reforms, such as the removal of oil subsidies and the floating of the naira, will be dependent on how the administration effectively combats corruption and implements social welfare programs aimed at bringing people out of poverty. Furthermore, insecurity challenges such as kidnapping, farmer-herder clashes, the Indigenous People’s Biafra (IPOB) insurgency and the Boko Haram terrorist group continue to pose significant challenges to the Nigerian state.

Poverty cannot be alleviated without political determination to tackle corruption. To achieve this, Nigeria’s anti-graft institutions must be stronger and autonomous in order to effectively prosecute corruption cases. Furthermore, the government must be willing to carry out four policy recommendations, including 1) behavioral insights to design more effective and independent anti-corruption tools, and abolishing the immunity clause in the Nigerian constitution, which shields Nigerian political office holders from being prosecuted while in office; 2) gender-responsive procurement policies to disrupt corrupt networks; and 3) implementing social welfare programs to reduce poverty in the country, and the government should prioritize an industrialization policy that fosters the localization of small-scale firms throughout the country to assist reduce unemployment.

About the author:

Olukayode Bakare is a Visiting Fellow and Teaching Associate of International Affairs at Durham University. He is also a Visiting Fellow in Security and Statecraft at London School of Economics and Political Science’s Department of International Relations. His PhD was awarded by the University of Aberdeen, Scotland in 2019. His research interests focus on African politics, international organizations, development, democracy, peace and security studies.

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