

## **Corruption and Nigeria Developmental Challenges: Insights from Exodus 23:8**

**Amara Mary Chukwuma-Offor**

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

E-mail: am.chukwuma-offor@unizik.edu.ng

amarachukwumaoffor@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

Corruption is an age-old phenomenon that has greatly challenged the moral, social, economic and cultural facets of the Nigerian nation. It is a bane that confronts national development and stability. It is no news that the scourge of corruption has done untold damage to Nigeria and its national aspirations. The annual corruption perception index (CPI) by the global anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International has consistently ranked Nigeria in the league of the most corrupt nations of the world. One can also point to the pervasive poverty in the land, dysfunctional public utilities, failure of government intervention programmes across multiple sectors as clear consequences of corruption in policy initiation, implementation, monitoring and feedback channels. Nigeria's failure to live to her immense potentials partly on account of corruption as espoused by several scholars relates directly to the bible admonition found in the book of Exodus 23:8 wherein the practice of giving and accepting bribes were outrightly condemned thus: *you will accept no bribes, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and is the ruin of the cause of the upright*. Will the country's woes be reversed if the Bible injunction which cautions against receiving and taking of bribes is heeded? This work adopts narrative-textual case study and concludes that the menace of corruption could be tackled if Nigerians could consciously and conscientiously practice the lessons enshrined in the periscope of the study.

### **Introduction**

Corruption has been identified as a serious problem for the Nigerian state long before the country gained independence from British Imperial rulers in 1960. As early as 1956, corruption has become such a major concern for the colonial administration that a panel of inquiry headed by Justice Strafford Forster-Sulton was set up to investigate allegations that the then premier of the eastern region, Nnamdi Azikiwe allowed public funds to be invested in a business establishment where he had interest- the African Continental Bank (Chukwudum, 2004). The colonial authorities indicted Azikiwe and in 1957 transferred all his shareholding in the bank to the government of Eastern Nigeria.

Things did not get better with the coming of the indigenous government in 1960. In 1962, the Tafawa Balewa federal government empowered Justice G.B. Coker to investigate the allegations that the premier of the Western region, Obafemi Awolowo violated public trust in his dealings with a private business, the National Investment and Property Company. The premier was indicted and his interests in the said business establishment was transferred to the government of western Nigeria (Chukwudum, 2004).

Things took a turn for the worse when in January 1966, the military toppled the civilian administration of Tafawa Balewa. One of the reasons given by the coup plotters which received widespread support from the public was the mounting allegations of corruption against senior government officials whom Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, one of the coup plotters called "10 percenters." The argument according to Madiebo (1980) is that corruption had

become so institutionalised in the system that asking and receiving 10% kickbacks by government officials for contract became normal.

At the end of the Biafran War in 1970, corruption became the central reason for every coup attempt with military personnel accusing the top brass of engaging in various forms of corruption. In December 1983, the Muhammadu Buhari military junta which had overthrown the Shehu Shagari government pointed to widening public sector corruption as justification for its action. The anti-corruption stance of the Buhari military junta still had little effect on the expanding culture of corruption in the land as Ani (2018) argues.

Maier (2000) avers that corruption took an unprecedented dimension with the coming of the Ibrahim Babangida regime. Corruption became institutionalised with several leading officials of government getting actively involved in all manner of unwholesome dealings without any fear of consequences.

The fact that about \$5 billion dollars stolen by late Sani Abacha (Premium Times Nigeria) has been recovered and returned to the public treasury since his mysterious demise in 1998 offers some insights into the level of corruption witnessed under the reign of the military dictator. The Abacha loot is still making wave even in the present administration that recently, in a press release of July, 9, 2023, the Federal High court in Abuja ordered the government of president Ahmed Tinubu to disclose the spending details of about \$5 billion Abacha loot. The suit filed by the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), was adjudged meritorious by Justice Omotosho who has ordered the ministry of finance to furnish SERAP with the full spending details of about \$5 billion Abacha loot; with details and locations of projects funded with the money. Worrisome enough is the excuse by the minister that the ministry has searched its records and details of the exact public funds stolen by Abacha and how the funds have been spent are not held by the ministry (Premium Times Nigeria).

In 1999, Nigeria again returned to civil rule with elected officials taking over the reins of power in Abuja, across the states and LGAs. Many had imagined that the principles of accountability, separation of power and hunger for development after several decades of military rule would keep corruption and self-enrichment through unwholesome practices under check. Events have since proven those expectations to be false. Nmah (2017) posits that corruption has continued to thrive under the democratically elected leaders and many scholars had argued that the level of widespread corruption in the polity is more gargantuan than what was witnessed under the military dictators. Igwe (2010), shares similar view as he points to the multiple instances of underdevelopment, violation of human rights, and decline of public trust as some of the consequences of the pervasive culture of corruption. Nwannekamma (2018) reports that 55 politicians stole over a trillion naira in just seven years under the current civilian dispensation. Major Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (rtd) was elected as president of Nigeria in 2015 general elections, after running on a platform of anti-corruption, promising to tackle the menace of graft in government, ensuring that there are consequences for bad behaviour. Transparency International Global Corruption Perception index released a report in January 2021 which shows that Nigeria's corruption standing has in fact worsened since the former military ruler took over from Goodluck Jonathan. It is glaringly clear that corruption and its adverse effects were felt even more during the two tenure of the self posturing anti-corruption government of Muhammadu Buhari.

## **Contextual Clarifications**

### **Corruption**

Corruption can simply be understood as any deliberate attempt to misappropriate public resources to private ends. The World Bank shares almost the same thought when it identifies corruption to represent the abuse of public office for private gains. To Agbese, (1982), corruption is what is obtained when we use our position in society to secure certain advantages. He listed these advantages to include: jumping a queue, being waved off at the checkpoint or making others bend the rules to accommodate our demands. He continued by pointing that several seemingly well intentioned actions which many regard as normal in our society are acts of corruption because such actions influence the actions of public servants and grants undue advantage to another person.

Corruption is the diversion of resources meant for the betterment of the community to the gain of individuals at the expense of the community. Corruption occurs when a public officer accepts money or any form of gratification to do what he is duty bound to do as part of his official routines. It entails deliberate binding of the system to favour friends. For Brownberger (1983), “corruption is a misapplication of public goods (broadly construed) to private ends.” To Bandfield (1996), corruption means the material enrichment or opportunities for oneself and or for others, through the use of public office (or influence) in ways other than those publicly acknowledged through rules and procedures of that office. This includes such behaviours as bribery (use of reward to pervert the judgment or actions of a person in a position of trust) nepotism- bestowal of patronage by reasons of inscriptive relationship rather than merit- and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private uses). International anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International captures corruption in its 2008 report to represent the misuse of entrusted power for private gains.

From the foregoing, one can now posit that corruption connotes all forms of wilful and deliberate manipulation of bureaucratic processes and systems to advance selfish ends. It could be direct or implied with the officials directly asking to be bribed to do their legitimate duties for which they are paid or refusing to do their jobs, which is an indirect way of telling would-be service recipient to grease the official’s palms. Corruption must involve at least two individuals to be so designated (Stople, 2008). There could be more players depending on the scope and the institutional culture within the establishment. Beyond the giving and receiving of money as Agbese (1982) observes, corruption also entails manipulation of processes and systems, diversion of resources, nepotism and hoarding or manipulation of information.

According to the Asian Development Bank, corruption involves certain behaviours on the part of officials in the public and private sectors, in which they improperly and unlawfully enrich themselves and on those closely related to them, or induce others to do so, by misusing the position in which they are placed.

United Nations Convention Against Corruption, recognizes corruption as a multifaceted, dynamic and flexible phenomenon, and therefore does not define, but describe corrupt practices. It sees and describes corruption as “a fluid concept, signifying different things to different people and as such an evolving concept.”(p.1). In Nigeria, these corrupt practices manifest as bribery, kickbacks, manipulation of election results, admission racketeering, sex-for-marks scandals in universities, cash for jobs in government and private institutions, petroleum products hoarding, nepotism, manufacture, importation and distribution of adulterated products, use of wrong scales in measurements and diverse other measures

employed by public and private individuals to either subvert due process or influence the outcome of bureaucratic protocols.

### **Dominant forms of Corruption in Nigeria**

Corruption is largely motivated by a number of factors in the form of social pressure, tribalism, nepotism, and incompetence. As has been noted by several scholars, According to Yetunde (2009), corruption in Nigeria takes the forms of misappropriation of official resources, kickback, over-invoicing, bribery in large and small measures, embezzlement, nepotism, money laundering, treasury looting and dishonest declarations.

One can go ahead to categorise corruption more broadly to include:

1. **Political Corruption:** In Nigeria, this form of corruption is very dominant and involves politicians, civil servants, policy makers and influencers. This is where those tasked with formulating public policies use their positions to advance their interests and those of their cronies (Akor, 2015).
2. **Electoral Corruption:** This is closely related to political corruption and happens when the standard rules guiding electoral conducts globally are trampled upon or abused by those with the economic, social and political power to do so. It may come in the form of vote buying which has become an ugly electoral culture in Nigeria, harassment of opponents, intimidation of voters, using awful tactics to suppress votes in opponents' strongholds, killing and maiming of voters, use of military/security apparatus to coerce voters and electoral officials to subvert the electoral process and every other act that directly or remotely interferes with the orderly and peaceful conduct of elections in such a manner as to influence the outcome.
3. **Bureaucratic Corruption:** This is very prevalent in the service sectors where citizens are made to pay bribes for services they are entitled to. Greasing the palms of officials, being denied a service because you refused to play ball, refusing services to people because of where they come from or the colour of their skin and several other actions which lead to denial of service all amount to bureaucratic corruption (Aluko and Adesopo, 2003).

### **Development**

Within the framework of this study, development shall be looked at strictly from the purview of economic and social lenses with a view to properly identifying and evaluating the context of developmental challenges confronting the country and how much of these setbacks are influenced by corruption.

From an economic standpoint, here is how Kindleberger and Herrick (1958) saw development:

... Economic development is generally defined to include improvements in material welfare especially for persons with the lowest incomes, the eradication of mass poverty with its correlates of illiteracy, disease and early death, changes in the composition of inputs and output that generally include shifts in the underlying structure of production away from agricultural towards industrial activities, the organization of the economy in such a way that productive employment is general among working age population rather than the situation of a privileged minority, and the correspondingly greater participation of broad based groups in making decision about the direction, economic and otherwise, in which they should move their welfare...(n.p).

A few things are central in this all-encompassing definition by the duo. First is that when discussing economic development, it is important to pay attention to a number of indicators including poverty, illiteracy, diseases and early death. Other critical pointers of the level of development in a society include the drivers of economic output (agriculture or industry or service), availability of opportunities for profitable employment for a broad base of people, and the participation of the general population in matters of governance and the level of input made by the majority in public policy formulation and execution. Economic development implies both more output and changes in the technical and institutional arrangement by which it is produced and distributed.

As pointed out above, a central element of economic development is a reduction in poverty levels. Contextually, economic development helps the people to move out of poverty level and enables them to grow and harness the chances of a better living. It is therefore, beyond ordinary increase in the GNP (Gross National Product) of a country. Economic development reduces the indicators of poverty such as low food consumption and unemployment saga, high mortality rate, insecurity and others. If these problems are effectively dealt along with growth of GNP and with a reasonably equitable income distribution then, the benefits of economic development would be felt.

The World Bank in its 1991 World Development Report aligns with the dominant views of leading development economists when it asserts that:

The challenge of development, in the broadest sense, is to improve quality of life. Especially in the world's poor countries, a better quality of life generally calls for higher incomes- but it involves much more. It encompasses, as ends in themselves, better education, higher standard of health and nutrition, less poverty, a clearer environment, more equality of opportunity, greater individual freedom, and a richer cultural life (p.18).

Beginning with the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economists' view of development began to consistently revolve around critical indices such as human welfare, better education, low unemployment, low malnutrition, disease, low poverty and more equality. Development must include both economic and social choices and suggests ways of improving standard of living, which must guarantee economic and social stability. Development should as a matter of necessity, expand the range of economic and social choices to individuals and nations by freeing them from servitude and dependence, not in relation to other people and nation states, but also to the forces of ignorance and human misery. Development is an innovative process leading to the structural transformation of the social system. Development must be a concerted effort towards achieving a progressive and eventual elimination of malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, unemployment and inequalities.

From the foregoing, it will be clear to the average observer that development in the real sense of it is still far from the reach of the Nigerian nation. In 2018, the World Poverty Clock as reported by Kazeem (2018) shows that Nigeria has overtaken India as the nation with the most extreme poor people in the world. Education in the country is in shambles with strikes, admission racketeering and other symptoms of underdevelopment and barefaced corruption regularly making it into the pages of newspapers. Things are a lot worse in primary and secondary schools with the government's lackadaisical disposition to the funding and development of education in line with prescriptions by global bodies such as UNICEF. The crisis of out-of-school children in the country is believed by many commentators to be at the heart of the security crises in the northern region.

Nigeria's developmental challenges persists not because of want of efforts to change things because, since the pre-independence days, several attempts at spurring national development have been made by virtually every administration. Hundreds of billions of naira are annually mapped out for infrastructural and human capital development in the appropriation bills sent to the legislative chambers for approval. Special intervention programmes and agencies such as the Petroleum Trust Fund, Niger Delta Development Commission, and several other bodies are regularly set up to support development initiatives in various regions and sectors.

The less than impressive performance of these development efforts is at the heart of this research effort where the study tries to find out how corruption impedes these age-old development efforts and the value of the scriptural admonition in Exodus 23: 8 to the Nigerian nation.

### **Analysis of Text (Exodus 23:8)**

The pericope which forms the sub-theme of this presentation is best understood by reading from the very beginning of the chapter which begins by warning God's people; the Israelites against spreading false rumours (information manipulation, misinformation with a mischievous intent and distortion of the truth to achieve unwholesome objectives). These as have been pointed in the previous sections as forms and variants of corruption which is intended to manipulate public opinions, deceive the masses and keep them in the dark over matters to which there ought to be clarity.

If one follows the Bible, it would be fairly easy to establish that God, through recorded history set out the Israelites to be His own people. From the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 through His encounter with Moses at Mount Horeb in Exodus 3, His call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3, Samuel's anointing of Saul to be King over Israel in 1 Samuel 10, the anointing of David in 1 Samuel 16, and across several passages in the Old Testament up till the birth of Jesus Christ in the New Testament which is the fulfilment of the Prophecies of Isaiah in the Old Testament, one sees that God had a peculiar interests in the affairs of the Jews, guiding them through various epochs, telling them what to do through the priests, the prophets and the teachers of the Law, God wants the Israelite nation to be a model society, one founded and sustained by strong moral values, love of justice and defence of righteousness.

In the portion of the Bible under review Exodus 23: 8, God told His people (Israelites) not to give or accept bribes. He goes beyond just admonishing them against gratifications; He pointed them to the dangers contained therein: for *bribes blinds the clear-sighted and is the ruin of the cause of the upright*.

The above is in tandem with His earlier admonitions in the preceding verses. *You will not spread false rumours. You will not lend support to the wicked by giving untrue evidence. You will not be led into wrong doing by the majority, nor when giving evidence in a lawsuit, side with the majority to pervert the cause of justice nor will you show partiality to the poor in a lawsuit. If you come on your enemy's ox or donkey straying, you will take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen under its load, do not stand back, you must go and help him with it. You will not cheat the poor among you of their rights at law. Keep clear of fraud. Do not cause the death of the innocent or upright and do not acquit the guilty. You will accept no bribes for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and is the ruin of the cause of the upright.* Exodus 23: 1-8.

In the passage above, God was giving the Israelites a template for social justice and uprightness within their society. In verse 9, the code of social engagement extended to “aliens” living in their land where they were admonished against oppressing foreigners living within their boundaries thus: *you will not oppress the alien; you know how an alien feels, for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt.*

The passage points the people to the importance of upholding justice by shunning social vices in all its variants, standing for the truth and refusing to be manipulated or misled in the course of standing for justice.

However, within the context of this work, this study is concerned with the express instructions against bribery and the implications of receiving or giving gratifications. The passage talks about “blinding the clear-sighted and the ruin of the cause of the upright.”

These are very similar to what is obtained in official circles in Nigeria. From the judiciary through the security agencies, the press, government regulatory agencies and public institutions, one finds clear proofs of “the clear-sighted” suddenly becoming blind to the obvious truth and looking the other way while processes are subverted and rule circumvented in favour of some individuals and groups. Bribes shortchange merit and promote mediocrity. One can therefore, aver that the long chain of mediocrity found across several government establishments can be traced to the menace of bribery where unqualified applicants are recruited, promoted and assigned tasks they were not properly equipped to undertake. You can also point to the list of misfits occupying critical elective positions across the land because they manipulated the electoral processes, bribed officials to pronounce them winners and paid bribes to judges across several courts to award them victory and deny the rightful winners the offices they were voted into by the majority of the electorates.

Going further, the pericope under review talks about ruining the cause of the upright. One can interpret this to mean sabotage, setting back the visions of growth, development and prosperity. This is particularly true in Nigeria where many well-intended visions and frameworks of development have been sabotaged by deliberate poor implementation, siphoning of funds through over-invoicing, payment for fictitious contracts and the elimination of due process in contract awards, execution and project monitoring.

Agencies set up to pursue targeted development in sectors and regions are failing because of the greed, incompetence and other acts of sabotage by the officials charged with implementing such visions. Projects targeted at boosting food production, bringing development into different geo-political regions, improving electricity supply, road and general infrastructure maintenance have all failed to live up to their founding visions because of the menace of corruption within the system thereby causing the people untold suffering while militating against the deployment of the country’s rich human and material resources to pursue developmental objectives in very sincere fashion.

### **Conclusion**

There is certainly no doubt that the menace of corruption has a deadly blow on Nigeria, its people and their developmental aspirations. Several scholars including Nwaodu et- al (2014), Ijewereme (2015), Aluko (2009), Ani (2018) and Akor (2015) have all demonstrated how clearly corruption constitutes severe threats to national development. Nigeria’s status as home to the largest population of extremely poor people, wretched and dilapidated infrastructure

unemployment. Massive dysfunctional public health and poor funded educational system are all fallouts of years of massive corruption in the public sector; which is captured in the forms of mindless and reckless attitude of both political lords and some public servants. The country's potentials for greatness is not in doubt but its abundant mineral and human resources have brought nothing tangible to the tens of millions of people not connected to the authority figures in government and other sources of power in the states. This is an anomaly that has drawn long commentaries from Maier (2000) and several other international observers who keep wondering how or rather why a nation would be so blessed and yet, so wretched.

The dangers of corruption were pointed out to the Israelites thousands of years ago during the leadership of Moses. In Exodus 23:8 which this piece had fully explored in previous section, God warned the Israelites against bribery, telling them that bribe *blinds the clear-sighted and is the ruin of the cause of the upright*.

The truism of this text has been demonstrated over and over again with the failure of several development initiatives and programmes in Nigeria. This is because over time, the noble ideas behind these agenda get mired in corruption and in place of development. This reality is manifest in different sectors of the nation: The education sector, health department, the judiciary, the Nigerian Power sector and countless poverty alleviation programmes and others. Is there a way out for Nigeria? Yes. The words of the scriptures (Ex. 23:8) written thousands of years ago point the country to the way forward. God is the God of all mankind and what He told the Israelites as he led them out of slavery in Egypt stands true today for Nigeria long held under the throes of corruption and misapplication of public resources. If the leadership of the country at all levels can do away with the menace of giving and receiving bribes, the ruin of poverty and other expressions of underdevelopment would naturally give way to the blessings of vision and purpose in public service.

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