CURBING CORRUPTION AMONG PUBLIC SERVANTS AND POLITICIANS IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC MORAL VALUES

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Abstract

Corruption is an evil that we must fight vigorously. Various methods need to be adopted so as to achieve this. This paper examines corruption, its trends among public servants and politicians in Nigeria, some of the factors that cause corruption in the country in Nigeria were also discussed. The paper further argues that some of the methods adopted by the Prophet (SAW) and his companions in curbing and safeguarding against corruption will assist tremendously in minimizing the current trends in Nigeria if carefully adopted. Finally, the ways that Islamic moral values can assist in curbing or minimizing the rate of corruption in Nigeria and recommendations on how to curb corruption in Nigeria are proffered in the paper.

1. Introduction

Etymologically, the world corruption is derived from the verb corrupt, which is also derived from the Latin word corruptus, which means “to change from good to bad in moral, manner or action” (Webster's Third New International Dictionary and Seven Language Dictionary, 1976:512) or “to degrade with unsound principles or moral values.” Mikailu (1988:6) sees corruption as the “pervasion of public office for private advantage.” Corruption is thus to change what is good to bad and right to wrong. It is to infuse into a system thing(s) that affects it to work effectively for personal gains. In Islam, corruption covers a wider sphere which bribery, misappropriation, embezzlement of public funds are only part. Any behavior that contradicts the teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) is considered as a corrupt practice. The Qur’an uses various terms and concepts to refer to corrupt practices. Some of these terms include Fasad (Mischief), Fisq (Impiety), Zulm (Wrong-doing), Ribah (usury) etc, (Al-Sa’adi 1997:70; 592).

There is hardly any segment of the Nigerian society that has no traces of corruption. Abubakar (2004:278-333) postulates that traders perpetrate corrupt practices with their goods in order to make more profit; petroleum dealers adulterate petrol with kerosene or water or kerosene with gasoline or water so as to make more money; security agents collect money from offenders and criminals and allow them escape; teachers award marks to students for money; civil servants engage in fraud to become millionaires, etc. There is hardly a day that one form of corruption or the other is not reported or discussed on the dailies and it is on the increase from regime to regime. This phenomenon has made Nigeria as a system unworkable, unproductive and retrogressive. Majority of her citizens have suffered greatly due to corruption particularly those perpetrated by public servants, political office holders and politicians. For the purpose of this paper, corruption is restricted to bribery, embezzlement and misuse of public funds by those who have been entrusted to be the custodians of the funds. Accordingly therefore, the paper attempts to examine the role
that Islamic moral values can play in curbing or minimizing the rate of corruption among public servants and politicians in Nigeria.

2. Public Servants And Politicians

Public servants here refer to employees who are appointed rather than elected to offices (Encyclopedia American, International edition Vol. 6, 1981:780). They are mostly guided by service rules and regulations, Mikailu, (1998:3). Normally aspiration or appointment to office is based on merit. Appointment is a method whereby employees are hired on the basis of their qualifications, as determined by their achievements in competitive examinations and not because of political affiliation, (Encyclopedia American, International edition Vol. 6, 1981:780). In Nigeria this category of employees are found in the Federal, State and Local Government services. They control ministries and extra-ministerial departments, Mikailu (1998:3). Politicians on the other hand refer to people who are either elected to offices or are appointed to head offices due to political connections without much importance attached to merit or professionalism. Thus we have the president, vice president, governors, members of the Federal and States Houses of Assembly, chairmen of local governments and the likes who fall under this category.

In Islam, all those who are entrusted to over-see the affairs of people are called Uli al-Amr (those charge with authority) (Qur’an 4:59) or Umara’u (People entrusted with power) (Al-SA’ADI 1997:148). According to Al-SA’ADI (1997:148) among the Uli al-Amr are judges, jurists and all those who work in order to promote the affairs of the religion as well as worldly affairs of the led. Thus Umara’u are people charged with the responsibility of running the affairs of the people either by virtue of being elected or appointed. They are therefore expected by Islam to discharge this responsibility with diligence bearing in mind that they are going to give account before Allah (SWT) for their stewardship.

Public servants are very crucial in the execution of government programs. They carry out governmental functions like implementing decisions of government, keeping government records of plan and execution and offering goods and services to the citizens. Thus if a government decides to give welfare service to its citizens, say poverty alleviation, provision of water, electricity and the likes, the role of civil servants for its success is very important. Deductively therefore, public servants and their qualities are very paramount in the extension of the presence of government to the citizenry in the nooks and corners of a Local, State and Federal Governments. Moreover, they can invest and enhance investment through the income they earn.

Prior to the attainment of independence in Nigeria for instance and immediately after it, we had the first class civil servants who helped not only in the formulation and implementation of policies for the betterment of the citizens, but were also pious and excellent in the discharging of their duties. They eschewed corruption for which they are respected to date (Mikailu 1998:5). Through imbibing piety and moral values, they were able to render services to the region and the common man. Consequently, the lot of the masses improved very significantly and the region and the nation prospered.

Politicians are representatives of their people by virtue of being elected. They have direct interaction with the people, exchange views with them thereby becoming acquainted with the needs of the masses and their aspirations. Policies and programmes are mapped out to ensure the attainment of these needs and aspirations of the masses. Therefore, politicians and public servants are complementary to one another. While politicians formulate policies that will better the lot of the citizens, public servants ensure the implementation of these policies.

It is regrettable that corruption has emanated among these categories of people entrusted. The moral values they imbibed in the past are gradually deteriorating. Degeneration and corruption
marred their image and denied them the respect, honour and merit they earlier enjoyed in the 1960s. Mikailu (1998:5-6) has succinctly, highlighted some of the moral and corrupt practices observable among our contemporary public servants and politicians when he says:

First there are the usual problem of late coming to work, red tapism, nepotism and general work apathy among officials. There is lack of qualified personnel, absence of promotion even when due, excessive centralization of authority and misuse and abuse of office to serve personal interests. Corruption, defined as the pervasion of public office for private advantage, is also a key problem. The public sector is unfortunately being made to become conduit pipe for siphoning of public funds. They (civil servants) behave as if public funds under their control, as also other facilities are actually their personal property.

In the year 2001, due to high rate of corrupt practices perpetrated by Nigerian public servants and politicians, Transparency International, a Non-governmental Agency incharge of studying and fighting corruption in the world, declared Nigeria as the most corrupt nation of the world (Daily Trust, Vol. 1 No. 91, June 2001:5). Corruption since then continued to take place at all levels of governance, that is, federal, State and Local Government levels. In spite of the establishment of two anti-corruption agencies, namely, Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (I. C. P. C) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (E. F. C. C.), corruption among public servants and politicians in the country continues to thrive. It has been asserted that from June 1999 to April 2003 alone, state governments all over the country received a total sum of 1.7 trillion naira from the Federation Account, (Analysis, Vol. 3 No. 2, August. 2003:5-45). On the other hand, the Federal Government got within the same period, a total of 3.3 trillion naira (Analysis, Vol. 3 No. 3 Sept. 2003:5-26). The revenue drive of the country continued to increase since the year 1999 especially with the continuous hike in the price of crude oil, which as at the time of writing this article reached $132 per barrel, (Daily Trust, Vol. 19 No. 14 May 2008:32). In spite of this high rise in the revenue drive of the country, more than 67% of the citizens live below one U. S dollar a day, (Momoh, 2002:4). Politicians and few highly placed public servants misused and misappropriated these resources to the detriment of the majority of the citizens.

Various corrupt practices are employed by these politicians and the privileged public servants to defraud and loot public funds for personal use, collecting funds for boggy contracts, conniving with contractors or companies to only execute part of the job for the contract for the contract was awarded and the cost of the uncompleted part is shared and so on. These corrupt practices in handling the resources of the country have seriously affected the socio-economic well-being of the majority of Nigerians. Developmental projects that are mapped out for the benefit of the society but whose funds have been released but the jobs were not done have precipitated untold hardship on the citizenry. For instance, the probe by the House of Representative Committee on Power reveals that over 10 billion dollars were spent by the Federal Government in order to improve electricity supply in the country but all in vain. This huge amount of money was only shared between companies, politicians and some privileged public servants, (Weekly Trust, Vol. 11 No. 23, April 2008:1-5). The trends of corruption in the country are just like what the preliminary findings of the Committee reveals and affect almost all crucial sectors. Consequently, joblessness, poverty, high rate of violent crimes, lack of regard for Nigerians in the eyes of some of the International community, hunger, inadequate or total absence of social amenities, poor roads, decaying educational system and the likes became the lot of most Nigerians.

3. Causes of Corruption among Public Servants and Politicians in Nigeria

It is perhaps not out of place to briefly give a highlight of some of the factors that cause corruption in the country. Some of these factors are as follow:
a) Lack of fear of Allah (SWT). Most of our public functionaries who embezzle public funds that are entrusted to them have little or no fear of Allah (Taqwa).

b) Blind and unrestricted love for wealth precipitated because of lack of fear of Allah (SWT). Due to this cross love to become rich over-night, many public servants and politicians resort to amassing wealth illegally. Manson is built, luxurious and expensive cars are bought and millions of naira are kept at home and banks both within the country and abroad.

c) Inadequate welfare services

Welfare services to some of the public officers in Nigeria are very poor. The salary paid to some categories of the public servants can hardly feed them. Consequently, they resort to misappropriation of public funds entrusted to them whenever they had the opportunity.

a) Poor societal orientation whereby regards and honour are given to the rich regardless of the source of the wealth. Those who are known to be up-right in their conduct throughout their live are given little or no regard, if they don't have money. Due to this phenomenon, corruption in order to pile money increases among public servants so as to be relevant or continue to be relevant and influential in the society and the country at large. Imbibing moral values thus becomes very weak and in some cases seen as obsolete while quest for riches by hook or crook is given regard.

b) Lack of Punishing corrupt officers who have been found to have misappropriated and abused the trust given to them. This is a serious problem. In fact, some officers with cases of corruption against them are even given appointments to more lucrative posts.

c) Laws at present tend to be inadequate to enhance swift prosecution of corrupt officials. In fact, some sections of the 1999 constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria, for instance tend to nurture and promote corruption. This is in effect making the functions of the two anti-corruption commissions very tiring and difficult.

4. Anti-corruption Models Adopted by the Prophet (SAW) and His Companions

The Prophet (SAW) and his companions fought and took measures to safeguard against corruption. First, the Prophet (SAW) disliked corruption and taught his companions also to hate it. This he did by sticking to the warnings given by Allah (SWT) in many places in the Qur’an. Allah (SWT) says:

The mutual rivalry for piling up (the good things of this world) diverts you (from the more serious things) until ye visit the graves. But nay, ye soon shall know (the reality). Again ye soon shall know! Nay, were ye to know with certainty of mind (ye would beware!). Ye shall certainly see hell-fire. Again, ye shall see it with certainty of sight! Then, shall ye be questioned that Day about the joy (ye indulged in!).

(Qur’an 102: 1-8)

Again He says:

Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet: women and sons; heaped-up hoards of gold and silver; horses branded (for blood and excellence); and (wealth of) cattle and well-tilled land. Such are the possessions of this world’s life. But in nearness to God is the best of the goals (to return to). Say: Shall I give you glad tidings of things for better than those? For the righteous are gardens in nearness to their Lord, with rivers flowing beneath; Therein is their eternal home with companions pure (and holy); and the good pleasure of God. For in God’s sight are (all) His servants.

(Qur’an 3: 14-15).
The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) complied with the teachings of these verses and taught the companions to do the same. He warned them of corruption devouring people’s wealth wrongfully in order to live in luxury. This world is temporal and as such they should not give much regards to it. He said:

*The world is a prison to the believer but paradise for the unbeliever.*

(Nawawi, Hadith No. 468:148)

Throughout his life, the Prophet (SAW) has never given regards to wealth and the world in general. When any wealth comes to him either from booty or gift, he disbursed it to the poor to ensure that wealth circulates among the poor. Abu Dharr reported that the Prophet (SAW) said:

*I would hate to possess as much gold as mount Uhud and then to allow three days to pass with a single dinar remaining with me except that which I may hold for the cause of religion, rather, I would give it away to God’s servants this way and that, on my right and left and in the back.*

(Bukhari)

From the above narration, it is clear that the greatest measure adopted by the Prophet (SAW) to curb corruption was to hate heaping wealth whether owned by him or the public for three days without disbursing it to the poor and rightful owners. This was his behavior and one day when he was given a gift of 99,000 dirhams, he ordered that they should be placed on a mat. When the placement was made, he started giving it out to people in need until the heap disappeared, (Nadwi 1979:420). Accordingly, the training was imbibed by the companions. For instance, Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (RA), while he was the caliph, resisted vehemently to a move made by some companions under the leadership of Ali Ibn Abi Talib (RA) to get his salary increased because it was observed that he was in difficulty and the salary cannot carter for him and his family. He considered that accepting the salary increase means clinging to the world and ignoring the footsteps of the Prophet (SAW) and Abubakar (RA), (Redha 1999: 37-38). In similar vain, when Ali Ibn Abi Talib (RA) was the caliph, he was informed by Ibn Al-Tay (RA) that the Public treasury (*Bait al-Mal*) was full with money, silver and gold, he said: God is Greater. He then went to the *Bait al-Mal* and exclaimed thus: ‘O white and yellow (silver and gold) tempt me not. Tempt others! He then instructed that they be distributed to the masses (Redha 1999:17).

These historical facts have shown the anti-corruption posture of the Prophet (SAW) and his companions. Had it been the Prophet (SAW) heaped wealth for himself and his family, the companions would have emulated the behavior. In our contemporary Nigeria for instance, many of our public servants and politicians compete with one another in accumulation of wealth, driving expensive cars and constructing multi-million houses. In the process, many of their lieutenants and subordinates become enticed and therefore emulate them. Resultantly, the rate of corruption in form of embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds become on the increase.

Giving preference to others over one self and one’s relations was another method used by the Prophet (SAW) and the companions to minimize corruption. When Fatima (RA), the daughter of the Prophet (SAW) requested from him a slave girl that will help her in domestic work, he refused. He said: By Allah I cannot give anything at the time when the bellies of my companions of *Suffa* [a platform at the Mosque where poor companions lived just to attend the teachings of the Prophet (SAW)] (Nadwi 1997:427). When Abubakar (RA) appointed Yazid Ibn Sufyan the governor of Syria, he warned him not to give unlawful benefits to his relations. This is because if a Muslim officer appoints his kins on big and lucrative positions that they do not merit, he will be cursed by Allah for that action and he will not accept any of his excuses or apology for that until he enters hell, (khan 1982:59).
This is only a glance in the way they fought and safeguarded against corruption. A new paper will be required to thoroughly discuss the topic.

5. Islamic Moral Value and Curbing Corruption

Islamic moral value is multi-dimensional and deals with man and his creator, man and his fellow men and man and other creatures, (Abulati 1985:40). This moral value system is built upon absolute belief, fear of God (Taqwa) and doing righteous deeds. A believer in God is expected to act only within the parameters set for him to operate by Allah. He is to obey Allah and do what He has ordained to be done and shun what He has prohibited. This belief and fear of Allah, which Islam preaches is firmly linked with the Day of Judgement. It is a Day that people will render account of their stewardship during their stay in this temporal world. The Qur’an says:

\[\text{Every soul shall have a taste of death: And only on the Day of Judgement shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the fire and admitted to the garden will have attained the objection (of life): For the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception} \]

\[(\text{Qur’an 3:185})\]

Fear of Allah and one’s consciousness of rendering account before Him on the Day of Judgement is the cornerstone, which guides and checks our actions in Islam. When the fear of Allah is very firm and the consciousness of rendering account before Him is sound, the more one’s actions are streamlined towards righteous deeds and shunning of sins. Such a person sees indulgence in bribery, misappropriation of people’s wealth under one’s custody and corruption and other wanton behaviours contradict the values taught by Allah, (Yahya, 2001:24). Therefore, a pious person considers only what Allah has approved as paramount and resultantly avoids any conduct that will make him loses his contact with Allah. All actions of his are consciously done bearing in mind that Allah sees and hears all things. Such a person hardly acts contrary to his conscience even if he is alone.

On the other hand, a person whose fear of Allah and consciousness of rendering accounts before Him is weak inclines towards evil and evil tendencies. He covets for the world and resultantly indulges in various forms of immorality.

Islam thus, maintains that human beings are created by Allah and as such all those who believe in Him sincerely are obliged to cultivate genuine and complete faith in His Oneness, attributes, absolute respect for His commandments, fear His displeasure and the Day when accounts will be rendered before him. The Qur’an in this regard says:

\[\text{The guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another nor shall compensation be accepted from her nor shall intercession profit her nor shall anyone be helped (from outside)} \]

\[(\text{Qur’an 2:123})\]

Islam has prohibited corruption in all its ramifications. Love of wealth and stiff competition for materialism makes people incline to corruption and misappropriation of public funds. Allah (SWT) has condemned these immoral values as follows:

Truly man is to his Lord ungrateful. And to that (fact) he bears witness. And violent is he in his love of wealth. (Qur’an 100:6-8).

In another verse the Qur’an is stern on those who indulge in corruption and misappropriation of public funds thus:
Woe to every (kind of) scandal-monger and backbiter, who pileth up wealth and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever! By no means he will surely be thrown into that which breaks to pieces.

(Qur’an 104:1-4).

Yet the Qur’an further says in connection with corruption:

And do not eat up your property among yourselves for vanity, nor use it as bait for judges, with intent that ye may eat up wrongfully and knowingly a little of (other) people’s property.

(Qur’an 2:188).

In a tradition of the Prophet (SAW) it is stated that:

“The curse of Allah is on the giver and taker of bribe.”

From these verses and hadith, it is clear that Islamic moral value system has condemned totally corruption, bribery and embezzlement of public funds under one’s custody. Commenting on the last verse for instance, Ali, (1982:75) stressed that two forms of corruption are pinpointed in the verse. They are using one’s wealth to corrupt others like judges or people in authority for an undue favour and to even spend public funds under one’s custody in frivolous ventures.

Islamic moral stresses that adherents of Islam should eat and spend only from what they have earned lawfully, (Qur’an 2:267), as a measure to reduce corruption in the society. It also urges that trust should be returned back to its owner.

God doth command you to render back your trusts to those whom they are due.

(Qur’an 4:58)

It is imperative to eat and drink from what has been lawfully earned as the Prophet (SAW) said:

Verily Allah, the Exalted, is pure and accepts only that which is pure. Allah has commanded the believers to do that which He has commanded the Messengers. The Exalted has said: ‘O Messengers! Eat of the good things and do right.’ And the exalted also said, ‘O Believers! Eat of the good things that We have provided for you and be grateful to Allah, if it is indeed He Whom you worship.’ Then he (The Prophet (SAW) mentioned a man who after a long journey is dishevelled and dust-coloured. ‘[The man] stretches his hands out toward the sky and says, ‘O Lord, O Lord while his food is unlawful, his drink is unlawful, his clothing is unlawful and his nourishment is unlawful. How is his (prayer) be answered [in such a state],

(Muslim)

The statement that Allah (SWT) is pure and accepts only that which is pure shows that only the deeds of the pious are accepted. Purity of deeds can be attained through making sure that one’s source of livelihood is lawful, (Ibn, Rajab, 2002:142-143). Eating what is unlawful corrupts one’s deeds and prevents them from being accepted.

Finally, Islamic moral value system upholds punitive measure against those who perpetrate corruption as a last resort. Thus Islam maintains that anyone who misappropriates public funds under his/her custody should have such funds or its equivalent confiscated from the perpetrator. This is called Radd al-Mazalim, restitution, a very good example of which could be found in the caliphate of Umar Ibn Abdulaziz (RA).
6. Conclusion

Corruption is an evil which all and sundry must put hands together to fight. Punitive approach in the form of arrest, detention, prosecution in courts which in many cases take a long time before disposal of cases could be complemented by adopting additional approaches. Multi-dimensional approaches like the use of Islamic moral value system are equally important. In other words trial of various disciplines in the study and struggle on how to fight corruption in the country is desirable.

7. Suggestions

Based on the foregone discussions, the following suggestions can be proffered in order to curb or minimize corruption among public servants and politicians in Nigeria.

a) Massive Public Enlightenment on the need to imbibe moral virtues.

This means that there should be a program that aims at inculcating the fear of God in the minds of people at the national level. In other words, the people should be educated on the moral teachings of Islam on corruption. The enlightenment should center on the fear of God and the Day of Accountability or Judgment where everybody will give account before his/her creator.

b) Punishment of corrupt public servants and politicians without discrimination should be pursued vigorously so that it can serve as deterrent to others. Islamic moral teachings believe in the equality of all before the law and as such all those who are involved in corruption should be punished equally irrespective of ethnic, social, economic or political consideration.

c) Speedy disposal of corruption cases against public servants and politicians currently in courts, to enhance justice. Any deliberate delay in the trial of these cases is injustice and corruption in itself according to Islamic moral value system.

d) Provision of effective and adequate welfare service to public servants and all those that are entrusted to over-see certain affairs of the society that can take care of their basic needs. Similar welfare service like Social security Allowance for the unemployed and the indigents in the society can be pursued. This will help to reduce corruption and crime in the country.

e) Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (I. C. P. C.) and the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (E. F. C. C.) should create units in their organizations that will deal with religious-cum-moral approaches to fighting corruption. The units can trace the history of righteous persons who lived in the past. The way and manner they conducted themselves and how they ended. Similar thing should also be done to the ungodly that lived in the past. This is very important and likely to help in moulding people’s character.

f) All laws that ten to hinder the effective performance of the anti-corruption agencies should be repelled. Similarly, all sections that seem to be fortifying or encouraging corruption, in any way, should be reviewed. In this regard section 308 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and similar areas ought to be amended.
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