

The New Face of Corruption in Nigeria

BY TONNIE IREDIA

“It is hereulean to fight corruption in a society where almost everyone is corrupt or where corrupt people are openly honored and received with fanfare at home or where no one bothers about any corrupt practice by a kinsman”.

Seventy-three (73) years ago, the Northern House of Chiefs made history when it passed a motion moved by the Emir of Gwandu mandating all native authorities to fight the disturbing trend of corruption among public officials in the colony. Other parts of what became Nigeria embraced the laudable motion. From then till now, our successive political and military leaders have all taken several steps to continue with the fight, but the malaise has refused to go. To name just a few efforts, General Yakubu Gowon's 'Public Officer (Investigation of Assets) Decree' of 1968, resulted in the forfeiture of corruptly acquired assets by culprits. The Murtala/Obasanjo military government sacked no less than 10, 000 public servants deemed to be corrupt. To invigorate our Code of Conduct Bureau, President Ibrahim Babangida in 1989 added to it the Code of Conduct Tribunal.

On his part, General Sani Abacha introduced the 'Advance Fee Fraud and Other Related Offences Decree No. 13 of 1995' as well as the Failed Banks Tribunal to deal with corruption. President Olusegun Obasanjo institutionalized the fight by establishing two anti-corruption agencies – the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Yet, corruption has remained the nation's number one enemy. Although many expected much from the acclaimed stern President Muhammadu Buhari, his ruling party the 'All Progressives Congress' APC unwittingly protected from prosecution, a large number of suspected corrupt politicians who decamped to its fold. The defections are now part of our political system with little or no sign that the situation would end soon. One would have thought that the cankerworm would have since become a thing of the past considering that the nation has been fighting it for the better part of a century. But that has not been so. One piece of evidence that perhaps suggests a tactical error in the fight concerns the role of the Police – Nigeria's main law enforcement body that no one has ever trusted. Whereas the public distrust tended to explain why the mandate was withdrawn from the Police and assigned to the EFCC, it was difficult to comprehend why all the EFCC Chief Executives except the current holder of the office – Ola Olukoyede have been Police officers. In other words, Nigeria tactically withdrew a sensitive duty from the Police and assigned it to a supposed more viable body only to surreptitiously allow the appointment of police



personnel to run the new organization. That was not all, the leaders of the EFCC also decided to use police methods as well as processes and procedures of the same force to execute their assignments. It is therefore easy to understand why in spite of the EFCC, corruption has continued to thrive. Reforms by Olukoyede notwithstanding, many people are convinced that some of our leaders deliberately use the anti-corruption body to fight political opponents. At the same time, members of the ruling parties, the PDP and the APC have often operated above the law when it concerns corruption. At a point, our federal legislators attempted to amend the enabling laws of the nation's anti-corruption bodies to virtually grant immunity to themselves.

However, a few recent research studies appear to suggest that even if some of the issues raised above played any role in our inability to defeat corruption, the malaise now wears a new vague face which may be more difficult to overcome for a long time to come. A critical look would reveal that the new face was molded by the much talked about resilience of the average Nigerian. The belief is that irrespective of the number and type of difficulties that Nigerians encounter, they have a way of surviving while the difficulties persist. But not many people have attempted to understand the nature and true meaning of the so-called resilience of Nigerians. As a result, it is usually said that Nigerians can endure anything with no one recognizing the implications of the said spirit of endurance. Indeed, one funny publication some years

back once opined that Nigeria, a country which suffers from years of infrastructural deficiencies and all forms of human capital challenges accommodates the happiest people on earth. My premise today is that the so-called tolerance and endurance have introduced into the country widespread corruption which encourages the people to engage in any negative behaviour just to survive. Here, we are not talking about the extremes such as terrorism and kidnapping; instead, attention is being drawn to common illegal practices that no one really frowns at. It is almost becoming a way of life for people to cheat not only because they have little or nothing but because the inexplicable wealth and prosperity of their neighbors

steer at them every minute of the day. The removal of fuel subsidy and the floating of the naira must have dealt a huge blow on Nigerians. It is however good to encourage citizens to bear it because as President Bola Tinubu anticipates, there could be light at the end of the tunnel, but why are some people enjoying solar light in the middle of the tunnel? This is the type of question that



makes many lose faith in public policies. There are in fact several unanswerable questions. Where for instance is the exact location of heaven where the reward of the typical dutiful Nigerian teacher is stored? While teachers are in penury, those they once taught in school are in affluence, yet someone is preaching against sale of handouts, admission racketeering and examination malpractices. If the fight against corruption is taken to such a sector, will the battle not be lost before it begins?

What this suggests is that everyone now hustles to make ends meet. Some judges now deliver judgments that are purchased and thus are bereft of justice. Media professionals publish whatever is paid for while the high and the mighty in churches preside over the functions of the wealthy with front seats reserved for late comers at worship centres who are the highest donors at events. Last week, one comedian revealed the reasons why police personnel set up checkpoints

directly opposite their stations. The first according to the comedian is because they are collecting money to buy needed basic essentials for their work. Second, their vehicles are either broken down or have no fuel, so they can't go far to set up the check points and by operating in front of their stations, they want citizens to know that their illegal action is officially endorsed.

One way of keeping the people's hope alive is for government itself to be prudent and to also avoid increasing the cost of its own services. An increase in the cost of procuring a Nigerian passport or higher fees at airport toll gates and doubling the former cost of ground rents etc. may raise revenue for government but those paying them would raise the cost of whatever they do to be able to raise enough resources to pay government costs. In other words, government should not be a catalyst for inflation because that could drive people into negative behaviors just to survive. If we must call a spade by its real name, there is no service in Nigeria today that has not been corrupted. The old belief

that corruption happens only in the public sector has since been proven to be false.

Apart from federal legislators, the wealthiest people in our clime today are bank chief executives who before our eyes have grown into billionaires from round tripping and other forms of insider abuses in the banking sector. Many of them are honored in society today and are offered courtesies in several public events as if we didn't know them only yesterday. Again, the old idea that corruption is found only at the top of an organization is no longer real as it is difficult to visit a local government secretariat and be

allowed in without bribing the gateman. Against this backdrop, we need a form of ethical campaigns before fighting the 'die-hard' criminals.

It is herculean to fight corruption in a society where almost everyone is corrupt or where corrupt people are openly honored and received with fanfare at home or where no one bothers about any corrupt practice by a kinsman. Public officers seeing how retirees are despised, are currently looking for funds for the future. In such a society, there would be many fake EFCC officials who are fueling corruption. Only last week, the Kano Zonal Directorate of the EFCC successfully prosecuted and secured the conviction of two fake investigators who used forged EFCC identity cards to extort money from people. There are many such fakes because everyone under the guise of endurance is hustling to make ends meet. That is the new face of corruption in Nigeria.