Nexus between political finance and corruption in governance.

By Jide Ojo

In case you don't know, the election is a multi-billion-dollar industry in Nigeria. If you tabulate what Federal Government spend to conduct general, bye, supplementary and off-cycle elections, what political parties, aspirants and candidates spend on their electioneering activities, what the security agencies spend to secure the election ecosystem in the lead up to, during and after elections, what the donor partners spend to support the Civil Society Organizations on voter education, election observation and observation of election tribunals, what the National Assembly spend to amend or enact the Electoral Act and constitutional alterations relating to elections and what the various media organizations spend on logistics to cover election campaigns and election day activities; it is gargantuan and mind-blowing! I am one of the experts in political finance in Nigeria. I have been involved in policy design and capacity building for politicians, electoral management bodies, journalists, civil society organizations and even security agencies on tracking of campaign finance and combating vote trading. Many Nigerians have not been able to connect the dots between campaign finance and corruption in governance. That's what this piece is about. Am using the political contestants (aspirants and candidates) as a case study. Officially, election spending for a candidate in an election begins with the purchase of expression of interest and nomination forms. Ahead of the 2026 party primaries, these are what aspirants under the All Progressives Congress, African Democratic Congress and Nigeria Democratic Congress charged.

For APC, the party charged N100m, N50m, N20m and N10m for presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial and House of Representatives positions, respectively. ADC charged N90m, N30m, N10m and N5m for the same positions, while NDC's fees are N60m, N30m, N8m and N6m for similar positions. However, unlike the other two political parties, NDC came up with a policy of aspirants paying only an expression of interest fee, which is pegged at N20m, N10m, N3m and N2m, respectively, before contesting party primaries, while only aspirants who win at primaries get to pay the nomination fees (which is the balance of the aforementioned fees). This is exemplary and unprecedented. Section 92 subsections 2-7 of the Electoral Act 2026 places a limit on what each candidate is to spend on his or her campaign. For presidential candidates, the limit is N10 billion, governorship N3bn, Senatorial N500m, House of Representatives N250m, State House of Assembly candidate N100m, Area Council Chairmanship N100m and Councillorship N10m. It is important to note that it is not mandatory for the candidates to spend up to this ceiling. The truth, however, is that many frontline candidates spend well above this limit for their elections. There is a penalty for breach of this provision. Section 92(9) says "A candidate who knowingly acts in contravention of this section commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of 1 per cent of the amount permitted as the limit of campaign expenditure under this Act or imprisonment for a term not more than 12 months or both." Unfortunately, for 27 years of this Fourth Republic, no one has been prosecuted for overshooting this campaign expenditure limit. That's why impunity continues.

It's been very difficult to effectively track political finance because of so many hidden costs. Senate Leader, Opeyemi Bamidele, in a viral video at the inauguration of his constituency projects, said some of his allies were angry with him for not contesting the 2026 governorship election in his home state of Ekiti. He said, "Because I declined the push to contest against Governor Oyebanji in 2026, some people fought me. You see, contesting an election in Ekiti has now become an industry for some people. What some people are interested in is to force you to contest so that two to three years before the primary election, you will be spending, and then you become a 'permanent employer of labour'." How do you track this kind of spending? It's barely six months to the 2027 general election; the candidates' nomination process is ongoing with the political parties uploading their candidates' nomination particulars on the INEC portal. Be on the lookout, you'll see the campaign offices of candidates sprouting like weeds. The truth is, no serious candidate will rely on his or her political party office for planning and coordination of campaigns. There isn't enough space for all the candidates being sponsored by the party to share. For planning and logistics, privacy and confidentiality are necessary. Meanwhile, depending on available resources, many candidates may have more than one campaign office. Candidates such as President Bola Tinubu of APC, Atiku Abubakar of ADC and Peter Obi of NDC will likely have campaign offices in FCT, 36 states, 6 geo-political zones and 768 local government and six area councils. This is not mandatory, but depending on available resources. These offices will be staffed and equipped, campaign vehicles procured, an interactive website launched, and political adverts publicised and rallies held.

There are hundreds of pre-election matters filed across our High Courts over disputes emanating from the party primaries. Litigation, either as plaintiff or defendant, does not come cheap. In fact, the election period is a boom season for many lawyers, especially those with a reputation for winning election-related matters. Political parties do not bear the cost of litigation for their contestants. Everybody paddles his or her canoe. Despite being financially exhausted after five months of campaigns, it is still the candidates that bears the cost of paying the Polling Agents and setting up the situation room to track election results and carry out parallel vote tabulation. Spending does not end there. Post-election litigation comes up after the declaration of winners. While some of those who lost will go and file cases against the victors at election petition tribunals, the victors will also assemble a crack team of seasoned lawyers to defend their mandate. This legal tussle will drag on for between 240 days and 300 days, depending on the position being vied for. For instance, for a gubernatorial election, the case will be determined within 180 days at the tribunal, 60 days at the court of appeal and 60 days at the Supreme Court. For other positions, it's 180 days at the tribunal and 60 days at the appellate court. Now, considering the humongous resources spent by contestants on elections in Nigeria, is it surprising that politically exposed persons are alleged to be corrupt when they are in government? Many uninformed people said our political office holders earn the highest salary ad allowances in the world. That's debatable. For me, legitimate earnings, either in terms of allowances and salary, may not cover your election expenses in four years. This is because, as you make money in politics, you also have to spend on a multitude of your supporters and loyalists after your inauguration.

Former Minister of Youth and Sports Development, Solomon Dalung, recently disclosed that lawmakers demanded a N200m bribe from him during his first budget defence. He stated that the demand was made after he presented his ministry's budget proposal. When he responded that he could not fulfil the request because there was no budget line for "bribe" in the appropriation, the committee abruptly dismissed him from the session and continued discussions with the ministry's Permanent Secretary. This is a corrupt practice, no doubt, but the lawmakers were desperately looking for an avenue to recoup their humongous election fund. Don't forget, lawmakers don't control the budget like their counterparts in the executive arm of government. The irony is that some people contest more than once across many electoral cycles before they eventually win. Once they do, the rat race will be on how to recoup their previous investment.