

**CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES
IN NIGERIA**



EDITED BY

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THE MORAL AND ETHNIC DECAY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: THE CHRISTIAN CHALLENGE

BY

IYABO A. OLOJEDE

INTRODUCTION

In the face of widespread corruption, ethnic chauvinism and consequently, political instability in the last two decades, there has been a strong search for immediate and long lasting solutions to Nigeria's political problems. In government circles, there is the recognition of the fact that the search for a new political order will require a transformation of value and behavioural orientations. This position found expression in the adoption of mobilisation strategies. Examples include Obasanjo's Jaji Declaration, Buhari's War Against Indiscipline and Babangida's Mass Mobilisation for Economic Recovery, Self-Reliance and Social Justice. Regrettably, past and current efforts at mobilisation were/are confronted with the monumental challenge of overcoming the alienation, frustration, apathy and hatred of the masses arising from inept leadership. On the other hand, others have argued that any attempt at reordering Nigerian society would involve a transformation from the present exploitative, capitalist system to an egalitarian society based on socialist ideals¹. Ironically

the wind of change blowing in China, Soviet Union, Hungary and Poland is a clear manifestation of discontent in the communist enclaves².

It is the contention of this paper that much can be done by Nigerian Christians to eliminate corruption and ethnicity. After all, Christianity is a way of life. It is more than religious belief. The paper therefore seeks to examine the role of Christians in reshaping Nigerian politics in general. Specifically, the paper will focus on strategies to ensure a fine turning in the decadent public realm. In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, this paper is divided into five sections viz:

- (i) Conceptual Clarification
- (ii) Corruption and Nigerian Politics
- (iii) Ethnicity in Nigerian Politics
- (iv) Christian Factor
- (v) Conclusion

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

A good starting point to understand the concept 'decay' is to quote the useful definition of College Dictionary. It states decay as the breaking up, going to pieces, or wearing away of anything, so that its original wholeness is impaired. Encyclopedia Americana also explains decay as the slow change from a sound, or desirable state to a state considered less desirable³.

From these two definitions, there are two obvious implications. First, decay is an outcome of changes in the integral piece which in turn leads to disintegration. Second, it is an undesirable state that needs surgical operation. Nigerian political system can be likened to a whole body afflicted by two cancerous diseases. These are corruption and ethnicity. These intractable problems are fast threatening the existence of the nation.

Precise meaning of corruption has been a subject of controversy for decades. It has been variously defined. A Dictionary of Social Sciences defines corruption as the use of public power for private profit, profferment or prestige for the benefit of a class or group, in a way that contributes a break of law or of standards of high moral conduct⁴.

In this paper, political corruption shall be defined as the unlawful use of the official power or influence by an official of the government including ministers, legislators, civil servants, employees of local government, parastatals - to enrich himself or further his cause and/or by any other person at the expense of the public in contravention of his oath of office...⁵ Corruption has been described as a global phenomenon. Political analysts have argued that corruption is more prevalent in some cultures than in others, but in most cultures it seems to be the most prevalent during the most intense phases of modernization.⁶

Ethnic groups can be described as socio-cultural entities which while inhabiting the same state, country or economic area consider themselves biologically distinct from each other and most often view their relations in actually or potentially antagonistic terms⁷. Fried notes that the nature of ethnic grouping in each society and the competitive short-term tactics and long-term strategies they employ are functions of history and the resources they seek to control⁸. Ethnocentrism in Nigerian politics is a practical illustration of Fried's contention. In Nigeria, people very rationally use their ties to other members of their family, clan, village) state or ethnic group whenever these ties seem likely to produce results - a place to stay in a new town, a job, a scholarship and political influence⁹.

It is not uncommon for persons of different religious orientation to have a conflicting checklist of characteristics of a true christian. In spite of the problems in delineating who a christian is, we shall attempt to provide a framework through which the term can be understood and placed within the context of this paper. On a superficial level a Christian can be referred to as a person born by Christian parents (by implication Christian by birth), one who is affiliated to a Christian church and a bearer of Christian name.

But in a more fundamental fashion a Christian shall refer to a person:

- (i) who may or may not be born by Christian parents (or in a Christian home);
- (ii) who has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour;
- (iii) who is a member of a church;
- (iv) who exhibits personality or traits in accordance to the Christian faith and as documented in the New Testament.

In effect, someone who does not fit into this classification in any way or form, may not be deemed to a Christian. There is always need for decision-making either in serving God or following Jesus Christ. This is the essence of true discipleship¹⁰.

CORRUPTION AND NIGERIAN POLITICS

At this juncture, we shall briefly trace the roots of corruption in Nigeria to aid our understanding of the depth and ramifications of the phenomenon in Nigerian politics.

Nigeria, is a country where individuals regardless of educational qualifications or exposure to the western world still adhere to social customs and practices. These traditional norms are of different types.

The first type relates to the exchange of gifts.

It is an established norm for friends, relatives, departing or returning sons and important visitors to exchange presents.

These exchanges were voluntary in nature without conditionalities. The age long practice of giving out presents became

the bench mark of corruption in modern Nigeria. The second

type of norm relates to the extended family. Employed sons

are expected to share their fortunes with 'kith' and 'kin'

regardless of income and level on the occupational ladder.

Civil servants are paid little, yet much is expected of them

by the wide circle of relatives. They are induced to

extort and circumvent government decisions to supplement their meagre salary.

Similarly, is the cultural defect of adulation of wealth which stimulates corruption. Successful Nigerians tend to display their wealth to the admiration and envy of neighbours and townsmen.

As rightly pointed by Labanji:

The Nigerians display their wealth, they display their knowledge and they also display their power. If they had the chance, some women would have their whole wardrobe in a show glass behind them on the street to let the whole world know how much they had. 11

The net effect is that public servants as microcosm of wider society strive to fulfill societal expectations through illegal acts.

Perhaps ~~more~~ important, is the increased role of government in citizen's lives. These range from commerce, health, education, communication, transport to housing. Consequently, the power of government officials increased, thereby creating opportunities for exploitation. In addition, is the civil **service** culture of red tapism. This heightened corruption as clients resort to bribes to effect speedy action.

For a concrete assessment, political corruption in Nigeria can be delineated into three periods - pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Corruption is not a colonial order as erroneously perceived. Prior to the British administration, corruption has always existed.

Historical and ethnographic studies have shown that some of our traditional rulers, chiefs, their emissaries and henchmen were perpetrators of certain institutional forms of corruption particularly in the adjudication of land related disputes¹².

With colonial administration (1900-1960), illegal practices gained momentum. Many junior officials were involved in corrupt practices. These were messengers, court interpreters, court clerks, tax collectors and judges of native courts¹³. Malpractices took the form of bribery, nepotism, extortion and embezzlement¹⁴. The amount of money

that was usually involved in these unofficial acts were negligible. The officials were usually contented with whatever they were offered. Senior officials were rarely found in such illegal acts.

But throughout most of post-independence period, corruption became an outstanding feature of public life. Corruption took another dimension. Old malpractices in colonial period were inherited. New malpractices were also added. Corruption became a household word. Policemen, customs officials, electoral officers, cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, military personnel were effectively involved in violation of legal practices¹⁵.

Nigerian police became synonymous with corruption. Tolls were collected from drivers on a wide range of offences which include traffic licences, permits and criminal activities. Civil-servants, politicians, colluded and received kickbacks from government contractors. Moreover, contractors that gave ten per cent kickbacks to government officials often performed their duties poorly¹⁶.

Electoral corruption was a recurring theme during the First and Second Republics. It was perpetrated by all the main political parties that existed in the country.

Military administration which crept into the Nigerian political dictionary on account of corrupt charges against politicians ~~was~~ not immune from corruption. On the contrary, it was tainted with numerous acts of bribery and corruption¹⁷.

For instance, during Gowon's regime, corruption came to a climax. The military governors, commissioners and those closely associated with the regime were not only believed to have amassed huge fortunes, they infact flaunted their wealth in a manner which most people found extremely distasteful¹⁸.

The finding of numerous probes revealed the extent of abuse of office or official negligence which was rampant in high offices.

Political analysts have argued that corruption is beneficial. Zolberg points out that what is usually called corruption... can be viewed under certain circumstances, as a fairly rational distributive system which is based on other than rational legal norms and hence is better adapted than burancracy¹⁹. Others have pointed to other advantages of corruption. Examples include reduction in administrative delays, industrial harmony through less demands for increase in wages etc.

While some of the positive aspects of corruption raised might be true, it is to be noted that very few people benefit in the process. The larger public suffers the misdeeds of few

public officials. The present economic paralysis which the nation is witnessing is an outcome of corruption which has ridden public life. The general down turn in the economy has thrown many citizens into abject poverty and general unemployment which in turn has led to a state of violence and crime.

Corrupt practices perpetrated by civilian and military regimes have largely contributed to coups and counter coups. The administrations of Tafawa Balewa, Yakubu Gowon and Shehu Shagari were abruptly brought to an end on charges which include corruption. For instance, Buhari in his maiden speech on 1st January, 1984 enumerated corruption among several reasons for military intervention²⁰.

Other heinous effects include anarchy. Election rigging, manipulation of election results in 1965 Western region election led to violent demonstrations which claimed many lives. Also, in 1983, alleged electoral frauds produced a spate of violence. Law and order broke down in several states especially in Ondo and Oyo States. Human lives and property were lost.

The prevalent apathy towards public affairs is an offshoot of corruption. As Peil notes, when elections were seen as fair as in 1959, enthusiasm was very high, over 80 per cent of those registered cast vote²¹. By 1964/65

knowledge that the system was being manipulated to maintain status quo produced widespread absenteeism 22.

Similarly, Oyediran in the 'Analysis of Voting Behaviour in the 1979 Elections' observed that no state during the 1979 elections recorded a turnout of up to 40 per cent in any of the three elections²³. He gave several reasons for the comparatively low figures of the turnout in 1979 when compared with 1959. These include the turbulent politics of the pre-military era which discouraged in particular the older generation of voters.

The glaring mismanagement of the economy and lack of exemplary leadership provided the impetus for masses to engage in corrupt practices. The Political Bureau which was inaugurated on 13th January, 1986, whose main duties include reviewing Nigeria's political history and identifying the basic problems which have led to our failure succinctly noted the precerious involvement of masses in despicable acts when it wrote that:

Corruption has become a household word in the Nigerian society. It pervades all strata of the society - from the highest levels of the political and business elites to the ordinary person in the village.

Its multifarious manifestations include the inflation of government contracts in return for kickbacks; frauds and falsification of accounts in the public service; examination malpractices in our educational institutions including universities, the taking of bribes

and perversion of justice among the police, the judiciary and other organs for administering justice; and the various heinous crimes against the state in the business and industrial sectors of our economy, in collusion with multinational companies such as over-invoicing of goods, foreign exchange swindling, hoarding and smuggling. At the village level, corruption manifests itself in such forms as adulteration of market goods or denting of measures to reduce their contents with a view to giving advantage to the seller. 24

ETHNICITY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

As we know them today, Nigerian ethnic groups developed their boundaries and even their character only within the context of Nigerian politics²⁵. Before colonial administration, what existed were amorphous polities, many were organized around city, states, others in Kingdoms, and yet others with the narrowness of villages with no conceptions of wider political entities within which they are implicated²⁶. Ethnicity in Nigeria has a colonial origin and its functions tied to nature and purpose of colonialism²⁷. As the British colonialists developed roads, railways, postal communication many different linguistic areas were opened up for interaction. Thus, the trend for rural-urban migration began. In such circumstance it became inevitable for host and migrant communities to organize themselves communally to safeguard parochial interests in the face of scarce resources.

Although ethnic divisions was a colonial order, it was profitably carried over by the new ruling elites for consolidation of political influence. In the race for decolonising state, political parties were formed to mobilize the masses and also provide leadership. Regrettably, the main political parties were fashioned along ethnic groupings. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was an Ibo based party led by Nnamdi Azikiwe. Action Group (AG) was formed from a Yoruba socio-cultural organization, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) also emerged from the Hausa cultural organization, the Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa. Its membership derived mainly from the feudal lords in the North. It was formed for Northerners, by Northerners, and for the pursuit of objectives limited to the North and Northerners²⁸.

The new nationalist class adopted primordialism as a political weapon to gain the support of the masses who were largely illiterate. Emphasis was placed on ethnic solidarity for the fulfilment of parochial benefits at the expense of national cohesion. While the Yoruba politicians advocated for Yoruba solidarity, their Northern counterparts called for northern unity in the face of threats from better educated southerners. Northernization, covertly served as an avenue

for political patronage for members of privileged class²⁹.

The politicisation of ethnicity continued even after independence in 1960. Thirteen years after military rule, one would have expected a detribalized politics. Unfortunately the ethnic politics was revived in The Second Republic. Political parties were highly communalised. They followed the ethnic pattern of the First Republic. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was an offshoot of the NPC with the Northern elites on its leadership. The party like its predecessor consisted mainly of northern elements. The Nigeria People's Party (NPP) was led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the former leader of NCNC with large followership among Igbos. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) was an offshoot of the AG with the same leader of the party, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The party had largest followership among the Yoruba speaking peoples in the Western part of the country.

In the process, these leaders succeeded in creating the false impression that the various political parties were the champions of the interests of various ethnic groups, and that struggles of these parties for political dominance in the country represented the struggles of the various ethnic groups for political ascendancy in the society³⁰. In competition for the limited numbers of positions and scarce

resources within the states and at the centre, political parties generated antagonism and hostility among the various socio-cultural groups in the country³¹. Their campaigns often emphasised some alleged conflict of interests among these groups with each party claiming to be protecting and advancing the interests of one of the ethnic nationalities or the other³². The inevitable consequence is national disunity.

The aggressive projection of ethnic difference has made impossible meaningful economic development necessary for political growth. Planning and development projects are necessary for the performance of the welfare functions of the state. Government capital projects are universally predicated on the availability of reliable data. Planning and execution of development projects have been made difficult in Nigeria as ethnic conflicts and bickerings provide censuses that are not ensured. Since number counts in the quest for sharing rewards and benefits, various ethnic groups did all they could to inflate the figures of their regions. As a result, of the three national enumerations under independent governments, only 1963 census was accepted while 1962 and 1973 censuses were rejected. Since Nigeria attained independence in 1960 every successive government accorded housing, health and education high priority area³³.

By and large, they are constrained by the non-availability of relevant figures for meeting these basic needs³⁴.

CHRISTIAN FACTOR

Our objective in this section is essentially prescriptive. The paper recognizes the multi-religious nature of the Nigerian State. Today, the dominant religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam and Traditional religions. Precisely, the Nigerian Constitution articulated the secularity of the Nigerian state. Nonetheless, our attempt in this paper coincides with the tireless efforts of the concerned public in reordering the Nigerian society.

The precarious social - political ills described in previous sections was not a recent phenomenon nor exclusive to the Nigerian society. For example, Biblical records revealed that in the days of Amos of Tekoa, Israelites and their neighbours exalted materialism that the fear of God was at the lowest³⁶. The quest for material gains provoked perversion of public positions: As confirmed below:

... for they sold the righteous for silver
and the poor for a pair of sandals.³⁷

Also, in contemporary times there is no nation completely devoid of corruption or some form of nepotism/sectionalism. We do not know of any country where the citizens do not complain of declining moral standards (whether liberal-

christian faith. Christians must be obedient to God's laws. By obeying God's commandments it would be easier to obey the laws of the land. By this concomitant act, they will be in a vantage position to convert others in their neighbourhoods. In the process, they will effect a positive influence on fellow Nigerians. As our Lord Jesus points to his disciples:

You are the light of the world. A City that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel but on a candle stick; and it giveth light into all that are in the house. 39

Through conduct worthy of emulation, christians can hold in check corruption and ethnic bigotry

Christians must be more involved in politics than they had done previously. Through their active participation they can bring God's standards of rightness on Nigeria's political system⁴⁰. In addition, it has the potential to move the political system away from bickerings of self interests of powerful persons/groups into a renewed concern for public interest⁴¹. Political participation must transcend voting and party membership. It should include contesting elective positions in both executive and legislative capacities. When christians are in legislative assemblies, they are in a strategic position to influence

laws for the sanity of the society⁴². Examples could be found in William Wiberforce, the christian politician in England who in spite of ridicule, initial defeat and threat stood vehemently against slave trade which was eventually outlawed in 1807. Wilberforce's passion for justice and righteousness ended slave trade. Christians who are politicians can bear a biblical witness on political structures.

In advocating a leading role for christians in the political arena, the paper does not subscribe to the formation of a christian political party or retreat from men of other faiths which can fuel religious antagonisms⁴³.

Rather, christians should join political parties of their choice. Given the temptations of politics - corruption of power, compromise with ideological opponents or party

caucuses one is tempted to ask how a christian politician can survive the manouvres characteristic of politics? The answer is in the affirmative. Every christian public official - legislator, commissioner, minister and voter must carry his chirstian conscience, enlightened by God's word into his political duty. Christian politicians must ask less what party caucuses and leaders dictate, and more what christian duty dictates⁴⁴.

Equally, christians must be involved in public discussions to influence public opinion. These can be done through articles in newspapers and participation in television programmes on issues of moral and political importance. Emphasis should be placed on the negative effects of corruption and ethnicity. Solutions must also be proffered using the christian doctrine. For instance, the law of love which pervades the Bible - Genesis to Revelation. If lucidly articulated, it has the potential of motivating citizens to serve the good of the society.

Christians in addition to the normal political machinery, also have available to them the God given power of prayer by which to bring about desirable changes, either in the personnel or in the policy of government⁴⁵. As exhorted by Apostle Paul, prayer provides the conducive climate for probity and peace:

I exhort therefore, that, first of all supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men. For kings, and all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of truth. 46

CONCLUSION

The paper has sought to examine the elements of decay in Nigerian political system via corruption and ethnicity. Of considerable importance to the discussion is the role of "self" and "money" in desecration of public office and ethnic projection. As observed earlier, civil servants, military rulers, governors, ministers, commissioners, parliamentarians and party officials perverted public dispositions to fulfil parochial objectives. This has produced undesirable effects. These include lowered respect of constituted authority apathy, disunity, political instability, indisciplined citizenry and a sick economy.

We conclude that Christians as Nigerian citizens have a role to play in rehabilitating the nation. Political ills are not healed by desertion. Christians are therefore urged to exert regenerative influence on fellow citizens and political institutions. These social and political reforms can be achieved through exemplary behaviour, prayers and active participation in the policy process. Through these avenues the vicious cycles of corruption and ethnicity can be broken.

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