

April/July 1992

ISSN 0001 8333

# THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL

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# PUBLIC SERVICE ETHIC AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA.

By

Iyabo Olojede \*

#### **ABSTRACT**

THE paper discusses the problems of ethical performance in the Nigerian public service and its implications for the wider public interest. However, it is believed that exaggerated reactions to diclosures of brazen acts of corruption and other forms of immoral conduct cannot solve the problems. Rather, a number of well-rooted strategies may be employed to stimulate higher levels of conduct in the public service and guarantee service and not disservice to the public.

#### Introduction

From time immemorial philosophers have often argued about the relative merits of methods of looking at and measuring moral behaviour. Diverse kinds of virtues and human goals have often been identified as the best or ultimate ways to understand and implement what is "good". In modern times, ethical pluralists

have argued that unillinear laws of ethics cannot define the means to good ends. 1 They further argued that a battery of tests must be employed to ascertain or determine when choices and decisions serve morally justifiable purposes/ends. Elaboration of no one virtue such as honesty. justice, selflessness or courage will providej the satisfactory measure.2 Moral/good behaviour emerged from applying them all. There is no doubt that the pluralist approach has the appeal of commonsense and would seem most applicable to performance in the public service. But applying any test to the behaviour of public officials poses some very complex problems which transcend those common to many other human relationships.

To many people, unethical perfomance in public positions is synonymous with blatant, overt corruption, involving fiscal gains such as the acceptance of bribes in return.

<sup>\*</sup> The author is a Lecturer at the Dept. of Political Science, Lagos State University.

or dispensing some favour or exemption from governmental impoition or actions designed to advance one's financial interests. 4 Undue emphasis on this type of unethical behariour is not only negative, but elementary, narrow and partial. This perception tend to overlook the more nsiduous forms of unethical perfornance which are diametrically opposed to democratic ethos. Examples nclude iefficiency, influencing policy lecisions to favour one's outlook or groups which one identifies with, and lesigning complex and ambiguous ules to twist the intent of law as gainst public or societal interests as whole.6

In this paper, we shall be conerned not only with the crudest violtion of acceptable performance, but los the imperceptible forms of unehical performance which are injurious to the public weal. Our liscussion in this paper shall specifically relate to the top public officials. This is because they set the tone of performance in the public service. While doing this, we shall inevitably ouch on the lower officials since hey form an integral part of the pubic service. In the face of the economic crises - dwindling domestic and foreign reserves, fluctuating ousiness activities, inflation and unemployment, there is a clamour for a responsive and responsible public service. The paper would therefore attempt to present a number of polcy recommendations which may stimulate higher levels of conduct in the Nigerian public service.

### THE REALITY OF ETHICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

In any democractic society, government is supposed to serve the citizens. More than ever, the government is looked upon by its citizens to assist in coping with an increasigly uncertain enviorment. The instrument through which government acheive societal goals is the public service. The net effect is a heightened level orf expectation toward government and its functionaries. For the public officials, this will require decision/actions that are both responsive and responsible. Given the above, can we comfortably assert that Nigerian public officials react positively to expected roles? This is the central question that this section will try to unravel.

The problem of ethical performance in the Nigerian public service is not a recent phenomenon. Historical records sustain this view. As early as the colonial period, corruptionu was a glaring feature. Many junior public officials were involved in corrupt practices. These were messengers, court interpreters, court clerks, tax collectors, and judges of native courts.7 Malpractices took the form of bribery, nepotism, extortion and embezzlement. It is pertinent to add that sums of money that were usually involved in these unofficial acts were negligible. The officials were usually contented

ance of bribes in return for dispensing some favour or exemption from governmental imposition or actions designed to advance one's financial interests.4 Undue emphasis on this type of unethical behaviour is not only negative, but elementary, narrow and partial.5 This perception tend to overlook the more insiduous forms of unethical performance which are diametrically opposed to democratic ethos. Examples include inefficiency, influencing policy decisions to favour one's outlook or groups which one identifies with, and designing complex and ambiguous rules to twist the intent of law as against public or societal interests as a whole.6

In this paper, we shall be concerned not only with the crudest violation of acceptable performance, but also the imperceptible forms of unethical performance which are injurious to the public weal. Our discussion in this paper shall specifically relate to the top public officials. This is because they set the tone of performance in the public service. While doing this, we shall inevitably touch on the lower officials since they form an integral part of the public service. In the face of the economic crises - dwindling domestic and foreign reserves, fluctuating business activities, inflation and unemployment, there is a clamour for a responsive and responsible public service. The paper would therefore attempt to present a number of policy recommendations which may stimulate higher levels of conduct in the

Nigerian public service.

#### II

## THE REALITY OF ETHICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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with whatever they were offered. Senior officials were rarely found in such illegal practices.

But throughout most of the post-independence period, corruption became an outstanding feature of public life. Corruption took another dimension. Old malpratices in the 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 practices. 10 Nigerian police became synonymous with corruption. Tolls were collected from drivers on a wide range of offences which include traffic licenses, permits and criminal activities. Civil servants, politicians colluded and received kickbacks from government contractors. Moreover, contractors that gave ten percent kickbacks to government officials perform their duties poorly. 11 Gross mismanagement of public funds was a recurring feature of the first and second republics. One of the most glaring cases of corruption was in 1983 when a public agency, the National Youth Service Corps Directorate (N.Y.S.C.) which in 1983 alone overspent its vote of N64 million by N309 million in a free-for-all rip-off of public treasury. 12

The problems of unethical behaviour of top public officials were aptly highlighted and summed up in the various declarations of Buhari and other military officers when Shagari's

regime was overthrown. An example is pungently given in the extract below:

You are all living witnesses to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years..... Our economy has been hopelessly mismanaged. We have become a debtor and beggar nation.... . Unemployment figures, including the graduates, have reached embarrassing and unacceptable proportions. In some states, workers are being owed salary arrears of eight to twelve months, and in others there are threats of salary cuts, yet our leaders revel in squandermania, corruption and indiscipline continue to profile public appointments in complete disregard of our economic realities. . . . . . Military administration which crept into the Nigerian political scene on account of corrupt charges against civilians were not immune from corruption. On the contrary, it was tainted with numerous acts of bribery and corruption. 14 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 in fact flaunted their wealth in a manner which most people found extremely distasteful. 15 The findings of numerous probes revealed the extent of abuse

of office or official negligence which was rampant in high places.

In the rat-race for selfish pursuits many public officials abdicate oaths of office to form powerful cliques to optimize their personal goals, thereby displacing corporate or public goals. As public projects are abandoned or shoddily performed, the publicity given to such instances leaves the impression to the public that the public service is rotten to the core and that the public officials are not committed to public interest.

As we highlighted earlier, brazen acts of corruption are more manifest than the latent forms of unethical behaviour. Disclosures of corrupt deals fascinate the entire public. Whenever a public official is caught, a large audience runs at his heels. While we cannot disclaim the fact that crude dishonesty or open stealing is injurious to public interest, as can be seen in the downturn of the Nigerian economy, there are other forms of administrative behaviour which are more dangerous to the achievement of public good. As Mosher rightly noted:

The harder and infinitely more important issue of administrative morality today attends the reaching of decisions on questions of policy which involve competitions in loyalty and perspective betwen broad goals of the polity (the phantom public interest) and the narrower goals of a group, bureau, clientele or union. . . .

The issues of admistrative morality

seem not to be well rooted in the Nigerian public service. Many public servants in Nigeria are more prone with the elevation of personal interests in the formulation and implementation of policy decisions. This view was confirmed by the political Bureau which was set up in 1986 to review Nigeria's political history and identify the basic problems which have led to our failure in the past and suggest ways of resolving and opening with these problems, among several objectives. In its recommendations, the latter observed that:

.... the civil service is bedevilled by many serious shortcomings which have militated against its efficient functionings. Its goals and aspirations are not properly directed towards improving the general welfare of Nigerians. Rather, the system has mainly served the interests of the bureaucrats and those of capital accumulation of private, local, and foreign companies.

The foregoing is not to indicate that public servants must be completely value-free. But it is expected that public servants must serve the public in a manner that strengthens the integrity and processes of democratic society. It therefore follows that public servants as knowledgeable people must be able to comprehend the complexities of ethical behaviour in the public realm. They are further expected to posses certain moral qualities of optisimism, manliness, truth, courage, and fairnes that could assist in resolving

the dilemmas as they arise. 18

A more complex aspect of administrative behaviour which may impinge on public welfare if not guided by the right moral attitudes (an awareness of moral ambiguity, appreciation of contextual forces at play, in-dept understanding of the need for rational procedures vis-a-vis responsiveness) in rule-making. 19 Theoretically, the political class determine public policies while public servants implement. But in reality, not only do public administrators execute the law, but they consciously make and even adjudicate laws. Much of the legislation coming out of legislative assemblies set the broad outlines of public policy, while the bureaucracy issue regulations to fill in the details. This has provided the bureaucracy the great latitude in influencing public policies. On a regular and daily basis, the public servants make the rules and regulations that affect citizens' social and economic lives. The public servant therefore has a moral duty to weigh the public interest as to the meaning, intent and spirit of the law. In order to further stengliten the democractic base of the public service, ambiguous rules must not be designed to thwart the intent of law or pursue selfish interests of a group, bureau or individuals.

#### III WHICH WAY FORWARD?

In most political systems there exist political institutions which serve as checks on the public agencies. Public administrators are not elected yet they

exert a strong influence in the political arena. This development make the control of public administration more important than ever. However, it is pertinent to point out that the effectiveness of these political institutions vary across the globe.<sup>20</sup>

In Nigeria there exist an array of political institutions (judiciary, legislature and press) which are most relevant under elected governments. Legistlative control methods include investigations through committees, questions/interpolations during legislative sessions. The judiciary is another important institution to check on the power of the public bureaucracy. It is anticipated' that aggrieved citizens may challenge the actions of administrators, and at times the policy decisions made on behalf of governments by the former. In Nigeria, like many developing nations, the passive political culture has not assisted in the development of these institutions. In practice, most method of accountability and control depend upon individuals or group actions to engineer demands before the mechanisms can go into operation. Rarely will one find aggrieved individuals pursuing their cases against erring public servants. Most grievances against public officials end in private discussions. Responsibility and accoutability imply a set of mutual participants (committed legislators and active citizens). Legislative assemblies would be ineffective if the citizens are not making demands on their representatives for protection

against encroachment from any quarter. There would be little or no incentive to expand energy or time.

Apart from the apathetic political culture, the system of seeking redress in law courts in Nigeria is long and tortuous. Recourse to the law court is not only time-consuming but an expensive venture. As a result, most aggrieved citizens accept the excesses of public agencies with utmost resignation

Under military regimes, one controversial development is the emergence of military tribunals to try erring public officials and other numerous miscellanous offences. As an example, The Recovery of Public Property Tribunal (Special Military Tribunals) Decree No.2 of 1984 provided for very long prison terms for persons found guilty of abuse of office. Despite the draconian jail sentences, unethical behaviour still abound in the Nigerian public service.

A more concrete step toward public accountability is the reactivation of Code of Conduct Tribunal by the Babangida administration. Although the 1979 Constitution provided for the establishment of the Code of Conduct Burea, but the Shagari administration vacillated about its establishment. The former did not actually function under the latter. One outstanding requirement of the Code of Conduct Bureau is the declaration of assests of public officers. While we cannot denythe fact that the establishment of the Code of Conduct Bureau is an important mile-

stone in Nigerian political development, it would be naive to assume/expect that disclosure of material assets solves all the problems. This simplistis approach tends to concentrate upon the prospect of temptation rather than the offence. There is an obvious fact that we must not fail to recognize. Persons bent upon self-serving pursuits cannot be curbed entirely through disclosure of investments and property. A self-serving public official will still invest methods to achieve his selfish pursuits regardless of window-dressing mechanisms as disclosure of assets.

The last mechanism for attaining morality in public service is organizational method. In Nigeria, the civil service rules are intended to elist from public servants desirable behaviour. A cursory glance at the civil service rules reveal extensive guidelines/procedures for discipline and official conduct - inefficiency, transfers, promotion, removing documents, official secrets, investments and business interests.<sup>22</sup> There are two shortcomings of this method. First, the sanctions available within the civil service system are not strong, especially if the offender is not an ambitious employee seeking promotion. Secondly, the application of sanctions require long and often complex administrative hear-

Our position in this paper is not a clear-cut abandonment of the previous mechanisms discussed earlier or the punitive methods. Corrupt self-

serving public officials must be dealth with. But our caution is against undue emphasis upon arbitrary restrictions and controls which are superficial and may not necessarily solve problems of ethic behaviour. Over reliance upon restrictive mechanisms for ethical performance in public service could scare away people of intergrity and guarantee a supply of unimaginative minds who would never contribute meaningfully to public policy. Depsite the instances various misdeeds of certain public officials, there are still some men who will not succumb to such venality. Insistence on rigorous control methods could deny government service dynamic and honest persons who are already suspects of wrongdoing even before assumption of office. If we are to expect higher levels of conduct, we stand a better chance of reaching our goal through longterm measures as against-emotional and exaggerated reactions.

Firstly, the principles of merit and competence must be strictly enforced to a reasonable degree in the acquisition of workforce in the public service. Similar principles must also apply in the appointment of political office holders — ministers, special advisers, chairmen of boards, and directorgenerals. There is a high correlation between quality and integrity.

Secondly, sound manpower policies should be employed in all government organizations. They should include character investigations for sensitive positions, relevant in-service

training, constuctive supervision, and leadership by example. The policies enunciated above cannot guarantee ethical behaviour, but it is almost impossible without them.

Thirdly, all educational avenues must be exploited to strenghten moral performance. This must begin from the primary to tertiary level. Postgraduate programmes in pre-service education must be emncouraged. The focus of such programmes should not be the sharpening of wits or the embarkment on rigorous theoretical postulations. Rather, they should be directed at the deeper understanding of democractic ideals and the appreciation of the democractic base of public administration.

Fourtly, honours and awards must be accorded to proven men of integrity in the public service. Quite often, many high performers are left unsung due to the misdeeds of some misguided elements. Public officials cannot be stimulated or strengthened by abuse and attacks. Whenever some wrongs are unearthed the tendeny is for the public to generalize and regard every public servant as inefficient, lazy and corrupt. If we expect to retain in the public service men of dignity and morally motivated personnel, accolades must be provided for the achievers. They must be included in the national honours. The universities also have a role in stimulating higher service through awards to outstanding officials.

Fiftly, there is a dire need for a new

cultural orientation by the society at large. Public-interest-oriented behaviour or action is a product of culture developed from series of influences familiy, schools, churches, and mosques. All Lilla rightly remarked, morality is something we live, an outlook, an attitude - not a set of propositions to be coined and applied with legal precision.<sup>23</sup> In Nigeria, the cultural state of the country is at the lowest ebb. In the search for material prosperity, parents abdicate their moral roles. When the family fails in its socializing roles, the child's character cannot be expected to favour the development of a healthy society. When such children become adults and employed in the public service they cannot hold political appointments and be expected to manifest public-interest behaviour. Similarly, the cultural adulation of wealth tend to stimulate immoral conduct.<sup>24</sup> Some individuals and groups known to have looted the nation's treasury sponsor the buildings of churches or mosques and are applauded for their often generous donations. 25 The above calls for a reorientation of those informal controls that induce moral behaviour - those internalized forces of conscience and

reason within the individual that offer the firmest promise of steady, certain moral conduct.

The politicization of the Nigeria public service and the opening of civil service jobs to outsiders, as introduced by the 1988 civil service reforms, should be continued and improved upon to ensure political commitment. The public service will more likely reflect value changes in the wider public as winners in elections bring their supporters who will promote government programmes and interpret rules in the spirit of the law. This would enure greater sensitivity to public demands.

Finally, publicity must be increasingly used to control bureaucracy. The mass media has a role to educate and inform the public on public policies and programmes. Through accurate reporting of the state of government policies and programmes, the public can know what is being done well or otherwise. Publicity can also deal with individual actions going beyond rules or excessive adherence to rules and procedures. Public officers or agencies are likely to correct lapses brought to light in order to do its public duty or avoid embrrassment.

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