

## **Political Corruption and Nigeria's Foreign Image: A Critical Assessment**

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### **Abstract**

**P**olitical corruption has been identified as one of many bane of the international image in Nigeria, Though the anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), Code of Conduct Bureau and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), are set up to tame this monster, cases of political corruption do appear unbaiting in Nigeria as they spring up almost every week and there has been virtually no regime without one or two striking corruption reportages among the serving elected or appointive public officers. This work examines the effects of corruption on Nigeria's foreign image between the periods of 2007-2023. Ex-post-facto research design was adopted while primary data sourced from interviews was complimented with secondary sources and elite theory was used to underpin its analysis. The study revealed that both Yaradua and Buhari regimes exhibited corrupt attitudes despite promising otherwise leading to the denting of Nigeria's image as manifested in unfriendly treatment of diaspora citizens, poor foreign investment and foreign aids attraction. The paper recommended that strong political institutions should be built through constitutional amendment and citizens and civil society organisations be more proactive amongst others.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Nigeria, Foreign image, Political corruption, Governance

### **Introduction**

Every country aspires to develop, and Nigeria is not an exemption making her strive towards attaining political, economic, social and other areas of progression with the main objective of improving citizens' lots to boost the national image. To drive this ambition home, strategic policies and concrete steps have been taken by many regimes from independence in 1960. For instance, import substitution manufacturing was vigorously pursued to diversify the economy from the crude oil commodity dependent in 1975 by the Obasanjo regime (Idowu, 2020), and the presidential system was adopted to replace the parliamentary political system by the same regime in 1979. As such, the superstructure of the political over other sectors (economic social or cultural) development appears more pronounced and underscored in Nigeria or any nation's development agenda.

However, corruption is identified as one of the corrosive elements of Nigeria's political system with its attendant effects on national image that is rapidly gaining greater attention today. This manifests in the electoral process characterized by money bag politics, political thuggery, godfatherism – anointing candidates to subvert a free and fair party primary election – as well as in governance with contempt for the rule of law, flagrant abuse of office, economic corruption amongst others political misdemeanour. In addition, Omo (2007) (cited in Ayandiji, 2007) avers that political corruption in Nigeria is largely responsible for killings, nepotism and favouritism, making many youths take to street gangsterism, armed robbery, prostitution, kidnapping and joining terrorist groups as escape routes to perversive poverty. Corroborating the above menace of political corruption and its ills, the immediate past president of Nigeria, president, Muhammad Buhari, notes that the country is faced with dipterous issues of corruption, accountability and credibility depleting its global image including its diaspora citizens' perception (Bello and Cosmas, 2022).

Similarly, Jega (2019) (cited by Odunsi, 2019) reiterates that corruption is a culture in Nigeria that poses a serious threat to the nation's political, social and economic development while Abdulakeem (2021) posits that political corruption vitiates democratic consolidation, sustenance of good governance and makes the country lose its moral and cultural values with overall negative consequences on its foreign image. It is gleanable from these submissions that political corruption has rounded adverse effects on both the internal development and external image perception of Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the country's endowments with human and natural resources seem to make her not fitting for this precarious situation. But, as noted by Balabanis et al (2019), despite the availability of natural resources in the country, an average family in Nigeria has less than a euro to survive for a day while those in governmental and public sectors loot and embezzle finances and resources meant for the masses and social amenities.

Also, Owuamanam and Agbaenyi (2021), argues that the depth of corruption is affecting Nigeria's image around the globe, forcing its citizens to immigrants in search of green pastures and a good life in places like Europe and America. Though the anti-corruption agencies such as Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), Code of Conduct Bureau and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), are set up to tame this monster, cases of political corruption do appear unabating in Nigeria as they spring up almost every week and there has been virtually no regime without one or two striking corruption reportages among the serving elected or appointive public officer. For instance, five high-profile cases are identified with the Buhari regime including that of the former Central Bank Governor, Godwin Emefiele and former minister of Humanitarian affairs, Sadiyar Humar Faruq (Adeleke, 2023). Can this project the country's image in a good picture to the global community? It is highly doubtful.

Arising from the above, political corruption and Nigeria's foreign image can be argued to be strongly related and not be isolated. Exist in the literature; scholars seem not to have interrogated that of political regimes corruption and external image nexus, making this research germane. The overarching objective of this paper is to examine the effects of political corruption on Nigeria's foreign image from 2007 to 2023, covering two regimes of Yarradua and Jonathan (2007-2015) and Buhari (2015-2023). This enables a broad-based examination that is capable of providing premises for empirical finding and generalization. The work has six sections which are an introduction, literature review, Theoretical framework, method, data presentation and analysis and conclusion and recommendations.

### **Literature Review**

This section reviews relevant concepts such as the concept of corruption, political corruption in Nigeria and Nigeria's foreign image to situate the research within the existing literature.

#### **The Concept of Corruption**

Corruption depicts an abuse of an office or privilege by the occupant either in the private or public space. It is more pronounced and popular in the public than the private sector, perhaps because of the public sensitivity and accountability demands from the office. Transparency International (2016 p. 24) conceives corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" while to Adefila (2014), it is an infinite and generic activity that promotes unfair dealing perpetuated by individuals to suppress the truth and cheat another person. In this sense, and arising from both definitions, corruption is a deliberate act of a citizen to illegally circumscribe a public office for personal gains or enrichment. In other words, corruption is a betrayal of public trust portraying an indecent public officer's conduct of subverting professional or

public ethics for personal advantages, thereby making national interest secondary to the advancement of individual, sectional, group or regional interest. As such, it is an indication of unpatriotic citizenship demonstrated by public servants (elected or appointed).

Nevertheless, corruption comes with a catastrophic consequence, including that of critically skewing and hobbling national political, economic and other aspects of growth and development (Abdulakeem, 2021). Sachs (2005 p 90) highlights the forms and devastating effects of corruption further thus: "It is the cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the country and had stunted growth in all sectors ranges from petty corruption to political bureaucratic corruption or systemic corruption" Though petty corruption signifies a small scale level abuses, examining the components of political corruption in Nigeria for better understanding of the forms of its manifest becomes pertinent for this study.

### **Political Corruption in Nigeria**

Political corruption is broad as it encompasses all ill-motive actions or acts of insincerity exhibited by public office holders. Hence, three aspects embodying many factors and indices are employed to dissect the concept of political corruption. These are: election-related corruption, Leadership and governance corruption and economic corruption. These are considered core sub-themes for analyzing political corruption in the Nigeria context.

### **Election-Related Corruption**

Election is indispensable and the legitimate means for regime transition in a democratic system of governance. It takes place at both the party primary and public context for office by political parties. According to Adiel, Danieli and Hanu (2020), electoral processes are meant to be protected by election managers and other key players have a significant obligation to ensure the integrity of the election process devoid of fraud and malpractice. However, the opposite appears the case in Nigeria as cases of electoral malpractices manifest in the following forms according to Babayo, Umar and Usman (2020), misleading or confusing ballot papers, ballot stuffing, mis-recording of votes, vote buying, misuse of proxy votes, destruction or invalidation of ballots, tampering with electronic voting systems, voters' impersonation, artificial results and partisanship of electoral officials, offices secretaries or observers.

Implicitly, since the process is devoid of decorum and integrity, the outcome will be generally unacceptable within and outside the country making both the voted and appointed political leaders not to command global respect or acceptability. This accounts for the International Crisis Group (ICG) submission, for example, that the 2007 election is the most discredited in Nigeria's electoral history and that it was a failed election and troubled transition from a civilian-to-civilian regime (ICG, 2011). Consequently, Ayandiji (2007) posits that the election crisis is a huge threat to the stability of the Nigerian political system.

### **Leadership and Governance Corruption**

There is a nexus between political leadership and governance as regime headship is often depicted with the president or head of government name. In the case of Nigeria's presidential system, the regime is represented by the president, making government policy, cabinet members' acts and inactions and decisions to be identified with the president and his regime. The general characteristic of Nigeria's leadership and governance has hardly been captured in the positive as virtually all regimes are associated with one or two striking poor governance indicators. Olugbemi (2020) succinctly and generally describes Nigeria's political leadership as corrupt, providing a fertile ground and environment conducive for the phenomenon to thrive incurably at the expense of national socio-economic, cultural and political development. This

suggests that the team leader and members are birds of a feather with no marked differences in perspectives and development ideation.

Describing their *modus operandi*, Nzeogwu (1966, cited by Nwogbo and Igbodalo, 2021) posits that Nigerian leaders are nepotists, corrupters of society, reverse back the country's calendars by their words and deeds and make it big for nothing in the international circle. The outcome of the bad leadership quality manifests in poor governance output evidenced in ethnic considerations for meritocracy, nepotism, lopsided appointment, poorly conceived policy and implementation amongst other vices.

### **Economic Corruption**

This is a dimension of political corruption that is revealed through the management or handling of national wealth especially, natural and financial resources. Corruption manifests itself in the public sector of Nigeria's economy in the form of abuse of positions and privileges, low levels of transparency and accountability, inflation of contracts, bribery/kickbacks, misappropriation or diversion of funds, under and over-invoicing and false declarations" (Goodling, 2020). There has been hardly a regime in Nigeria having no data and records of corruption, depicting the expected perception of such regime national and foreign images. For instance, about \$32bn was recorded to be lost to corruption during the six-year administration of ex-President Goodluck Jonathan by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (Obiejesi, 2017).

Given the above, Transparency International (2014) avers that ex-president Jonathan could not sustain the modest economic growth recorded by his government initially or save for the rainy day when the price of crude oil reached very high levels which subsequently depleted Nigeria's foreign reserves and incurring a huge debt profile due to a dip in the price of crude in the international market, It states further that Mr. Jonathan inherited as much as \$60 billion in the country's foreign reserve but plundered it to as low as \$40 billion in five years. It is obvious that the Jonathan regime economic corruption battered the national image as captured by Transparency International, one of the leading global watchdog of public economic corruption and data bank. In consequence, as of June 2014, the country's external debt rose by 40 per cent to \$9.377 billion and a domestic debt of \$47.653 billion. Though inflation was kept at a single digit, it was a faux strength as companies struggled to survive and the country continually ranked poorly in the ease of doing business index by the World Bank (Transparency International, 2017).

### **Conceptualizing Nigeria's Foreign Image**

Foreign image is the external perception of a country about its credibility, integrity, and governance and material power. It is a multidimensional picture that offers descriptions or information about a state character (Aleyomi and Abu Bakar, 2018). Hence Nigeria's foreign image depicts external actors such as states, non-states or citizens' beliefs about its positives and negatives in all ramifications of internal and external life determining her rating for diplomatic, business and other areas of international relationships. While the internal image is a self-perception of citizens or regime foreign image is the definition or interpretation of the domestic estimations.

In Nigeria, the external image crisis has been attributed largely to the consistent adverse political environment and its attendant poor socio-economic condition of the masses (Onwuamaam and Agbaenyi, 2021). Put differently, while there are many factors determining foreign image including home and abroad citizens' behaviours', the front-line factor is the

character, policies and dispositions of the political leadership to both domestic and external affairs. This goes a long way in shaping the internal political and socio-economic situation that influences and engages by external community for gauging her image. In this sense, every regime in Nigeria has always been subjected to image assessment by stakeholders especially for performance analysis in ease of doing business, politically, economically, and in other areas.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study considers elite theory appropriate for this study. The theory is propounded by Vilfredo Pareto, Mosca and Robert Mitchel with assumptions that the society is divided between the masses and the minority political leaders possessing power, unified due to shared background while the non-elites are diverse and powerless (Higley and Burton, 2016, cited in Osei, 2018). The elites exist in virtually all professions, that is, political, business, economic, academic with influence on resources management.

However, Political elites, in Nigeria's context, consist of a small clique or group of the president, vice-president, ministers, legislatures and top party leaders having significant power to determine national or international policy decisions and outcomes. The elites are expected, according to Dunmade (2015), to be committed to national and citizens improvement. Nonetheless, this has often not been the case in Nigeria as the masses' welfare has been falling short of the global expectation or standard with its concomitant international image battering consequence.

### **Methods**

Ex-post-facto (after-the-fact examination study design) research design is adopted for this study because it interrogates corruption as an independent variable that existed before the scope of the study on the Nigeria image within the period with the intent of applying the findings to understand the past and offer recommendations for the current or future situation. Experts' opinions through interviews from the academia and one anti-corruption agency – University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Nigeria Institute of International Affairs (NIAA) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) - are sought as primary sources of data using purposive sampling technique of three per each totalling twelve.

The expert views were textually analyzed and complemented with secondary data sources to answer the research question or achieve the objective. It is noteworthy that facial validity (three senior academics in the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos Nigeria reviewed the questions for the interview) was used to review the interview questions, which is consistent with the literature precedents and validate it as well.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This section presents both the primary data and their analysis. The research's main objective is to examine the effect of political corruption on Nigeria's international image under the regimes of Yaradua/Jonathan and Buhari regimes. The seven respondents' opinions constitute the primary data which is supplemented with secondary information as well.

Responding to the question: how did corruption affect Nigeria's image between 2007 and 2023? Five of the interviewees have a consensus opinion that Yaradua/Jonathan and Buhari make Nigerians believe that they will fight corruption before or immediately after assume office. For instance, the former admitted that the election that brought him to office was laden with fraud while the latter military anti-corruption regime image cum strong campaign against

corruption before the election. However, all respondents agreed that the manifestation of corruption was visible during this time in the polity via electoral fraud, party members favouritism, and abuse of office. And that the adverse consequences are concrete in the poor perception of the country's external image by countries and international organisations, depriving her of national integrity, international respect for her citizens and attraction of foreign investors necessary to improve her economic fortune and development.

Respondents five, three, two and seven avowed respectively thus:

*“President Jonathan came into office with a public support and goodwill. Across the world, Jonathan also received a healthy dose of support and political capital. Goodluck Jonathan's administration is an administration that promised to be different, be progressive, be accountable, fight corruption, and gives Nigerians a new life but rather it appears impotent. But of course, Nigerians should have known that this government was not going to be any different from any government in the last thirty years or so. This is because the regime made a lot of effort to curb corruption but the existing corrupt officials are still in government, hence “corruption continues”*

*“The electoral law that is being implemented in Nigeria is not followed duly. The democratic processes are being tampered with, the electoral reform which was initiated by various regimes was not politicized, this regime truncated electoral processes to favour the ruling party's desires. Hence, the foreign image of Nigeria after the election is seen as a country that violates democratic processes. Also, we know, for instance, that these negative practices increase transaction costs; discourage foreign direct investment; reduce the overall growth of the formal economy; it weakens our public and institutions; encourage the informality of the political and economic system and the effect is felt on Nigeria's foreign image.”*

*“The effect of political corruption was so intense during this regime to the extent that Nigeria's ex-President Jonathan warned his fellow citizens to stop trying to make asylum claims in Britain, saying that their reputation for criminality has made it hard for them to be accepted abroad. According to him, ‘I don't think Nigerians have anybody to blame’ Jonathan said they can remain at home, where their services are required to rebuild the country. Nigerian leaders appear not to fully understand the implications of Nigeria's negative external image for the country. The issue of the negative foreign image has severe economic implications for Nigerians abroad and by extension the development of the motherland”*

*“Transparency International has labelled Nigeria one of the most corrupt countries in the world in the corruption index of the world. Nigerians in Diaspora are dealt with cautiously because they are viewed to have a corrupt mentality anywhere, they find themselves and this has profiled lack of respect for Nigerian Citizens”*

As a corollary, Enweremadu (2013 p. 1) opines that:

*“The Nigeria case presents conclusive evidence of how corruption can determine or shape the national image of a country. Although corruption is a major challenge for several other developing states, hardly any other country has been more closely associated with the vice. Despite being aware of the reputational risks and costs presented by corruption, especially its effects on its external image, Nigeria has not been able to pursue a coherent, effective and sustained struggle against corruption. Indeed, the question is no longer whether corruption has now more or less become a defining characteristic of Nigeria”*

Arising from the pieces of evidence above, it is safe to assert that the manifestation of corruption during both regimes aside from the promissory notes tendered before their elections that influenced citizens' choices and existing anti-corruption agencies (ICPC and EFCC) expected to be strengthened for the fight against corruption, Nigeria is believed to be politically corrupt by the international community because the democratic principles are disregarded or observed in breach and there are cases of economic corruption. In consequence, the external image is battered as evidenced in the treatment of her citizens resident abroad or seeking asylum as they believed to have corrupt mentality. Also, it lessens the country's capacity to leverage international economic relations (foreign direct investment and international trade), creates legitimacy crisis, and reputable national image to attract foreign investment and foreign official assistance for development.

These findings concur with Adiel (2020) that political leaders abuse instead of uphold the democratic system; Nzeogwu (1966, cited by Nwogbo and Igbodalo, 2021)) that Nigerian leaders are nepotists, corrupt and reverse development agendas through their words and deeds; and, Onwuamaam and Agbaenyi, (2021) that Nigeria's unpleasant foreign image is tied to bad governance and the accompanying economic woes and poor masses condition. While the findings likewise affirm the elite theory assumption that elites are concerned with self-interest advancement in the polity it is inconsistent with Dunmade's (2015) assertion that elites are expected to seek or promote citizens' welfare.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research critically examines the effects of political corruption on Nigeria's foreign image during the regimes of Yaradua/Jonathan and Buhari regimes (2007-2023). It found that both regimes promised to combat corruption but not only fell short of Nigerians' expectations but manifested corrupt acts in the polity disrupting the political system that wither the foreign image of the nation. The aftermath of political corruption is witnessed in the poor image associated with the country in the global community which lowers her citizens' acceptability and reputation as business destination.

To make political corruption not an albatross on Nigeria's dwindling international image and socio-economic development, this study proffers the following recommendations. First, a strong political institution must be built through constitutional amendments especially reducing the executive power to checkmate or minimize leadership abuse or circumventing for personal aggrandizement or benefit. Similarly, adherence to office-guiding codes of conduct should be enforced through the awakening of its legislative arm of government to his oversight function on the executive. This is a path to enhance the executive arm's sense of accountability to the citizens as well.

In addition, the antigraft agencies – EFCC, ICPC and Code of Conduct Bureau should be reformed to rejuvenate their commitment to duty and improve their service delivery simultaneously. Appointment of the head and recruitment should be more transparent to the public and based on merit and not political consideration. Lastly, civil society organisations need to raise the tempo of their activities as public watchdogs, people's mouthpieces and interest promoters while citizen should speak up against the abuse of office by elites leveraging the freedom of speech constitutional provision through the conventional and social media.

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