

Ethical Issues and Challenges of Accountability in Nigeria's Public Administration¹

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Abstract: Research shows that no nation is likely to experience development that is sustainable without viable political leadership and properly organised and functioning public administration. Without the work of the public administrators in the area of implementation of policies, the formulated policies would only amount to mere paperwork devoid of practical societal development. With the analysis of secondary data, the paper revealed that Nigeria has failed in the different sectors to experience development. This is not, however, because of lack of human and material resources, but due to unethical behaviour and accountability challenges of some public administrators at the highest level of government that are entrusted to manage the public resources. To overcome this ugly situation, would be public administrators need grooming from the early age through the schools, religious centres and improved compensation for public administrators. The outcome is likely to be enhanced public service delivery and national development.

Keywords: ethical issues, challenges of accountability, public administration, sustainable development, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Some scholars have argued that practice of public administration is probably as old as a human civilisation. But the development of public administration as an academic discipline and field of study is relatively new compared, to other fields of studies in the management, social

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sciences, arts and humanities (Adebayo 1992; Tonwe 1994; Maserumule 2015; Fourie 2016).

In the early years, public administration for a long time was seen and addressed within the context of political science. However, because of the unique role ascribed to public administration by scholars and practitioners alike as a facilitator of development, there was a need to separate public administration from political science. As a result, public administration has come a long way to be accepted as a distinct field of study and practice to achieve national development. This is because public administration as a field of practice deals with the administrative aspects of human behaviour relevant to the development of the society (Fourie 2016; Gberevbie 2017). The implication is that without the proper practice of public administration, a nation's quest for development becomes an illusion. In this regard, Dimock (1937, 31-32) points out that:

Public administration is the fulfilment or enforcement of public policy as declared by the competent authorities. It deals with the problems, powers and techniques of management involved in carrying out the laws and policies formulated by the policy-making agencies of government.

Henry (2009, 308) argues that public administration “involves the implementation of public policies intended to provide services and/or impose regulations on individuals, groups and organisation in the political community. “This assertion shows that public administration is a problem-solving mechanism put in place to facilitate national development. Therefore, public administration could be seen as “that aspect of administration put in place to judiciously utilise men, money, materials/equipment and Information Technology (IT) to achieve the overall developmental goals of government” (Gberevbie 2017, 3).

The implication of this notion on development is that if the public administrators do not implement the policies formulated by the government, such policies would simply amount to mere paperwork. The success/failure of an organisation or government, therefore, largely depends on the roles of public administrators. This means that an organisation or a country becomes a lifeless entity until the practice of public administration ignites the power that produces life and motion in it for the good of that particular organisation or country (Ibid.).

THE CONCEPT OF ETHICS

The importance of ethical standard and behaviour in achieving both individual and organisational goals cannot be overemphasised. Adewunmi (1998, 6) sees ethics as something that “has to do with what is good or bad, what is morally right or wrong, what is acceptable in a given environment or not, what is expected of a person or not.” Also, Lawton (1999) views ethics as a set of guiding principles that regulate the conducts of people for an orderly society. According to Jennings (2006, 3), ethics “consists of standards and norms for behaviour that are beyond laws and legal rights.” In the same vein, Rosenbloom, Kravchuk and Clerkin (2009) see ethics as basically a form of self-accountability or inner check on public officials while carrying out their regular duties. They, however, pointed out that the inner check may be enforced by requirements that public officials’ behaviour comports with a variety of external standards or else, ethical issues become the order of the day.

In Nigeria, these external standards are enforced by legally established regulatory agencies of government such as Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal (CCBT), Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence Unit (BMPIU), Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) (Gberevbie 2013).

It could be argued that proper ethical standard and behaviour of governmental leadership and public administrators at different levels of government in any society are, therefore, vital to societal development. Furthermore, ethics has been observed by some scholars to be an important concept and catalyst for the realisation of organisational goals either in public or private sector and facilitate the improvement in the standard of living of citizens in any society. And where there are ethical issues or challenges, such a society is likely not to achieve its intended results that guarantee the enabling environment for societal development (Denhardt and Denhardt 2006; Bem 2014; Uguru and Ibeogu 2015; Ogbonnaya 2018). It could be concluded that there is a relationship between enforcement of ethical values or standards and proper implementation of public policies and programmes for national development.

THE CONCEPT OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Some scholars have argued that accountability is a vital concept that emphasises personal responsibility by organisational or political

leadership and the individual employee either in public or private sector with a view to promoting its interest for survival and growth (Agba, Ikoh, Ushie and Agba 2008; Odugbemi 2008; Gberevbie, Shodipo and Oviasogie 2013). Also, research has shown that without the accountability of governmental leadership and public officials, society would perpetually remain underdeveloped to the detriment of the citizens (Rasheed 1995; Dibia 2003; Gberevbie, Oyeyemi and Excellence-Oluye 2014). Ninalowo (2003) argues that accountability means the individual government official should make it a point of duty to always answer for his/her actions at all times to the citizens and be able to prove that his/her actions are in line with acceptable moral and ethical standards. Koppell (2005) points out that accountability has five major dimensions, namely; transparency, liability, controllability, responsibility and responsiveness of the public officials to the citizens. These five dimensions are fundamental for the proper policy implementation in the efficient management of public resources. In the same vein, Odugbemi (2008) asserts that accountability is the ability at all times for members of the public including the civil society to scrutinise public institutions or governmental agencies to hold them accountable for their actions with a view to bringing about proper implementation of the formulated policies and programmes. And where these are absent, accountability challenges become the norm in the society.

The foregoing shows that accountability of the political leadership and the public administrator is recognised as one of the most crucial determinants of proper formulation and implementation of public policy. Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluye and Oyeyemi (2017) point out that a society where political leadership and the public administrators are not accountable to the people that they are meant to serve, that society is likely to experience mismanagement of public resources, exhibit corrupt tendencies or unethical behaviour, and hence be faced with developmental challenges. Therefore, it could be argued that accountability of political leadership and public administrators that subscribe to proper ethical values are a catalyst to overcoming underdevelopment in the society. This implies that there is a relationship between accountability, proper ethical values of public administrators and implementation of public policies and societal development.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES OF UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR OF SOME PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS AND POOR MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC RESOURCES IN NIGERIA

Below are some of the documented empirical evidences in Nigeria of poor management of public resources by some political leadership and public administrators at different levels of government:

Salary Fraud in Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs): In November 2019, the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related offences Commission (ICPC), uncovered NGN 12 billion padded in the salaries of some (MDAs) of government. According to the ICPC Chairman, Prof. Bolaji Owasanoye, about NGN 9.2 billion was first restrained after the ICPC discovered that monies meant for salaries were over-budgeted, while another NGN 3 billion was uncovered after salaries were paid to workers. He revealed that 59 directors were arrested for using their accounts to defraud over NGN 3 billion from government coffers. The funds were diverted to their accounts without proper explanation prompting the agency to step in, and arrest them. He pointed out that ICPC restrained the money and invited the agencies to attest to what they found and the MDAs involved did not dispute it (Nwezeh 2019; Onani 2019).

Subsidy Payment on imported Petroleum Products: The Federal Government of Nigeria continues to engage in petroleum products subsidy payment for fuel importation into the country even though Nigeria is an oil-producing nation with dysfunctional refineries spread across the country. The argument for the payment of subsidy on imported refined petroleum products into the country was to make the products available and affordable to the citizens at the right time since the refineries in the country are unable to produce to full capacity. However, Sango (2008) argues that a situation whereby the cost of subsidy payment on petroleum products by the Federal Government is even higher than the budgeted capital expenditure in the national budget cannot make for successful fight against underdevelopment in Nigeria. For instance, the cost of subsidy paid by the Federal Government on imported petroleum products between 2006 and 2008 alone amounted to NGN 1.7 trillion or USD 10.96 billion estimated to be twice the annual Federal Government of Nigeria's capital expenditure. Troubled by the government in 2011 due to the increasing cost of petroleum subsidy payment arising from the suspected unethical behaviour and accountability challenges of some public officials in the administration of the petroleum products subsidy policy

in Nigeria, an audit enquiry was instituted. The audit report on the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) submitted by Klynveld Peat Marwick Geordelah (KPMG) to the Federal Ministry of Petroleum Resources showed that the cost of subsidy payment on petroleum products not consumed by end-users due to losses from theft and even those not supplied for use in the country between 2007 and 2009 amounted to NGN 11.8 billion (Agbo 2012; Gberevbie 2013). In March 2018, the Federal Government's subsidy on fuel was NGN 774 million per day, and in May 2018, due to price increase of crude oil in the international market, the daily fuel subsidy rose to NGN 2.4 billion (Akpan and Eboh 2018). It should be noted however, that when a barrel of crude oil in the international market was between USD 80 and USD 100 in 2013 and early 2015, the local cost of the pump price of petrol per litre was between NGN 65 and NGN 97 respectively (Gberevbie, Ibietan, Abasilim and Excellence-Oluye 2015). On the other hand, between 2016 and 2018 with the low price of a barrel of crude in the international market that was between USD 40 and USD 60, one would have expected that the cost of the local pump of petrol per litre and fuel subsidy paid by the Federal Government would have been lower than what it was between 2013 and early 2015. This is because the usual explanation for the high cost of fuel subsidy payment by the government is that the higher the price of crude oil in the international market, the higher the price of petroleum products imported into the country and hence, the higher cost of subsidy to be paid by the Federal Government (Akpan and Eboh 2018).

The foregoing implies that the lower the cost of crude oil price in the international market, the lower the local pump price per litre and, hence the lower the fuel subsidy to be paid by the Federal Government. While the higher the price of crude oil in the international market, the higher the local pump price of petrol per litre, and the higher the subsidy to be paid by the Federal Government. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case with present-day Nigeria. Currently, a barrel of crude oil in the international market is less than USD 75, yet local fuel pump price is now above NGN 160 per litre and the government has spent more on the payment of fuel subsidy between 2016 and 2019 than what was spent on fuel subsidy payment between 2013 and early 2015 when a barrel of crude oil was between USD 80 and USD 100, which is contrary to economic sense and development strategy in any country (Ibid.). For instance, in the 2019 national budget, the sum of USD 1 billion or NGN 305 billion was provided for

fuel subsidy payment by the Federal Government, an amount that would have been used for infrastructural development (Sanyaolu 2019).

On November 21st, 2019, the Petroleum Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA), the body charged with petroleum pricing in Nigeria revealed that the Federal Government of Nigeria subsidised the cost of petrol by NGN 19.37 per litre. This is despite the fact that the pump price per litre then was NGN 145. This implies that pump price per litre ought to be NGN 164.37 without subsidy from the Federal Government. With this level of subsidy paid by the government, the total amount spent on fuel subsidy as at November 2019 stood at NGN 1.06 billion daily with an official consumption rate at 55.8 million litres per day (Yusuf 2019).

The high amount spent on petroleum subsidy has been attributed to unethical behaviour and accountability challenges of those entrusted with the administration of the fuel subsidy payment policy in the petroleum sector by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Esele 2009; Gberebie et al. 2017; Akpan and Eboh 2018; Rafindadi and Musa 2019; Yusuf 2019). The implication of the huge sum of money paid for refined petroleum products importation as subsidy by the Federal Government on a regular basis, which is higher than capital expenditure of the national budget means that the goal of infrastructural development of the Federal Government is likely to be an unrealisable dream, thereby negatively affecting the living standard of the citizens.

Poor Decisions by Public Officials: The wasteful spending of government officials at the Federal Government level was so glaring in 2019 that the then Chief of Staff to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, late Alhaji Abba Kyari had to take a Bill passed by members of the Nigerian National Assembly to the President who was on a foreign trip to London for his assent. To save cost, the Bill could have been given to the Vice President to sign or keep the Bill for the President to sign at his return from the foreign trip to London (Akinkuotu 2019).

Instead of keeping the Bill for official assent in Nigeria to reduce cost of governance, it was taken to the President in London, which would have definitely cost the nation a huge sum of money in foreign exchange in form of allowances to: the Pilots and Crewmembers that took the then Chief of Staff to London, cost of Jet A1 fuel for the aircraft, cost of landing and parking in London airport, allowances for

the engineers that maintain the aircraft both in Nigeria and London, hotel accommodation for all who undertook the trip with the then Chief of Staff to London and their feeding cost. The money used for the journey to London by the then Chief of Staff, late Alhaji Abba Kyari and his entourage to get the President's assent on the Bill could have been avoided to reduce the cost of governance and the funds spent on developmental projects to advance Nigeria's development and enhance the living standard of the citizens.

GAPS IN NIGERIA'S PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Leadership gap in the Nigerian public administration is manifested in ways such as, poor accountability, unethical behaviour, and poor educational standard, lack of leadership training, nepotism and undue favour to one's own ethnic and religious affiliation. Discussed below are some of the poor decisions arising from political leadership gap in Nigeria:

Severance Allowances for Political Leadership/Public Administrators at the State Government level in Nigeria: where wastefulness in the management of public resources has openly manifested at the state government level is the payment of severance allowances and gratuities to ex-political leaders such as former state governors and their deputies, former speakers of state houses of assembly and their deputies. In January 2017, a "report calculated that over NGN 37.36 billion was expended on servicing 47 former governors in 21 of the nation's states as pension payments and provision of houses, staff, and motor vehicles replaceable between three and four years" (Guardian Editorial Board Online, 2019 December 6).

The pattern of the payment of 'jumbo' pension and severance allowances to ex-political leaders/administrators at the state government level is the same all over the country, including state governments that find it so difficult to pay workers' monthly salaries, gratuities and pension for up to 20 months, in some cases. These include:

Akwa Ibom State: The pension law in Akwa Ibom, which was first passed in 1998, provides free medical treatment for ex-governors, their spouses, ex-deputy governors and their spouses. Until the amendment that was done in April 2014, there was no cap for the expenses. Since the law stipulated 'free medical treatment' for ex-governors and family members, and ex-deputy governors and family members, it meant that

an ex-governor and his ex-deputy could spend NGN 500 million or more on medical treatment per year.

With the amendment, however, a former governor and spouse could not spend more than NGN 100 million a year, and a former deputy and spouse a maximum of NGN 30 million. Widows/widowers of former governors are entitled to NGN 12 million a year, while those of deputy governors would get NGN 6 million. Other benefits include 100 per cent of annual basic salaries of the incumbent governor and deputy, one house not below 5-bedroom maisonette in either Abuja or Akwa Ibom for the former governor. In addition, an amount not above NGN 5 million for ex-governor and NGN 2.5 million for ex-deputy to employ cook, chauffeurs and security personnel (The Cable 1 Online, 2014).

Zamfara State: Until the amendment to the state pension law as carried out under former Governor Abdulaziz Yari before 2011, ex-governors of the state collected NGN 7 million and their deputies NGN 2 million every month as pension. However, during the tenure of former governor Yari that ended on 29th May 2019, he signed into law a revised pension and allowances bill that entitled ex-governors to collect NGN 10 million every month, while that of ex-deputy governors became NGN 5 million, ex-speakers was NGN 3 million and ex-deputy speakers was NGN 1.5million per month. In addition, ex-governors were entitled to 5-bedroom house in any location of their choice in Nigeria, two vehicles to be replaced every four years, free medical treatment for them and their immediate family members, vacation within and outside Nigeria (Umar et al. 2019, 5).

Due to the heavy economic burden of allowances and pension for ex-political leaders placed on the state government under Governor Bello Muhammad Metawalle in 2019, the Zamfara State House of Assembly decided to introduce a bill to repeal the ‘jumbo’ allowances paid to ex-political leaders in the state. The Zamfara State House of Assembly Leader, Faruk Musa Dosara argued that “past political leaders in the state made up of ex-governors and their deputies, speakers and their deputies were collecting over NGN 700 million annually, an amount that the state economy could no longer accommodate” (Umar 2019a, 4). The bill stopping ex-political leaders from collecting ‘jumbo’ pension and gratuity in Zamfara State was eventually signed into law by the present State Governor, Bello Muhammad Metawalle on 27th November 2019.

While signing the bill into law, the Zamfara State Governor pointed out that the immediate past governor of the state, ex-governor Yari paid himself NGN 360 million as severance allowance just before he left office on 29th May 2019. This was in addition to NGN 10 million monthly pension allowances for him as ex-governor of the state (Umar 2019b, 4). Governor Bello Muhammad Metawalle argued that:

It is on record that the backlog of pension and gratuity for local government workers and primary school teachers left behind by ex-governor Abdulaziz Yari's administration stands at NGN 3 billion, just as that of the retired civil servants stands at NGN 3 billion. What moral justification could be offered for such 'jumbo' package for a select few when the social index has consistently indicated that the majority of our population lives in abject poverty (Umar 2019b, 4).

Sponsorship of Pilgrims with Public Funds by Some State Governments: One of the areas observed to be a major waste of public funds is the spending of government and its agencies on things that are not necessary and hence could have been avoided or reduced to the barest minimum. For instance, available records show that several state governments in the country are yet to pay their workers monthly salaries (some over 20 months), spent billions of naira of public funds to sponsor pilgrims to Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia on yearly basis. Findings show that Plateau State spent a total of NGN 2 billion to sponsor Christian and Muslim pilgrims between 2017 and 2019. Adamawa State spent NGN 148 million to sponsor 1,692 pilgrims for the 2019 Hajj. Cross River State spent the sum of USD 40,000 or NGN 14.480 million to sponsor 50 pilgrims in 2019. Gombe State spent the sum of NGN 198.880 million to sponsor 131 pilgrims in 2019. Taraba State spent NGN 276 million to sponsor 184 pilgrims in 2019. Edo State spent NGN 192.40 million on the 130 pilgrims sponsored (Daily Trust Newspaper Editorial Board 2019, 1, 5).

The spending of public funds to sponsor people for pilgrimages in Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia yearly by the various state governments was possible due to the unaccountable behaviour, unethical governmental style of political leaders and wastefulness in the management of public funds by some public administrators. The public funds could have been used to provide the people with proper healthcare facilities, good roads and renovation of school buildings for a conducive to learning environment, thereby improving the living standard of the people.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ISSUES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

Public administration in Nigeria can be made responsive to the needs of the people in terms of improved public service delivery through the following strategies:

a. Religious Centres: It has been observed that religious teachings have practical impact on those that subscribe to such religious belief. Therefore, religious leaders have a major role to play in helping to shape the direction of future leaders in any society. They must at all times train their members on the values of hard work, accountability and godly morals. Sound religious teachings are likely to impact on the individual members to avoid unethical behaviour, which could serve as a catalyst to producing future Public Administrators that are fully prepared to properly implement government policies and programmes for the benefits of the citizens.

b. Establishment of Core Administrative Schools: Establishment of properly funded administrative schools purely devoted to training Public Administrators would go a long way to producing the required administrators in Nigeria. Such schools should be given the opportunity to train people to the highest degree level of a PhD only in administrative field. The schools can take the teaching of ethics and accountability in addition to other administrative courses as requirement for graduation. The graduation from these schools would no doubt bring about availability of competent workforce in the administrative sector. A specialist from these schools is likely to exhibit sound administrative judgement in the implementation of public policies and programmes that would bring about national development more than handpicked individuals as Public Administrators without the required training.

c. Proper Compensation of Public Administrators: There is need to reasonably compensate Public Administrators as way of motivating them for performance. A situation where a public administration's income cannot meet his basic needs and that of his immediate family cannot promote high productivity. A demotivated workforce is a deficit to the attainment of organizational goals and aspiration. Unethical behaviour amongst Public Administrators is likely to be the norm in an organisation that delays in paying wages and salaries to its workforce more than the one that takes the issue of its employees' welfare seriously. Therefore, there is a relationship between timely,

regular and improved compensation of employees and organizational enhanced performance.

The above discussed strategies/recommendations have implications for the discipline of Public Administration:

d. Development of Public Administration as Academic Field: When the above-mentioned strategies/recommendations are applied, Public Administration as a field of study and practice would benefit from quality human resource as future practitioners of public administration for societal development. This would bring development of public administration both in study and practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper revealed that accountability challenges and unethical behaviour of political leadership/administrators have created lack and poverty amongst the citizens of Nigeria.

Besides, with ethical values and proper accountability imbibed by public administrators, wastages in different sectors of government are more likely to be reduced, and unethical behaviour among public officials that hinders development would likely become a thing of the past. The future outcome would be development of the society in different areas such as: democracy and the rule of law, security of lives and properties, democratic practices in governance, and infrastructural provision in terms of good roads, quality healthcare services, improved transportation system, better communication system, quality water supply, improved educational system and better life for the ordinary citizens.

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