

EFA-F 2018 ANNUAL LECTURE

TOPIC:

**RAISING OUR HEADS ABOVE CORRUPTION-COLOURED WATER LEVEL
IN A TIME LIKE THIS***

By

**Dr. Folake Akintayo⁺
Faculty of Technology,
University of Ibadan
Ibadan**

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**FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN
IBADAN**

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⁺Department of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Technology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Introduction

The topic of this discourse brings to mind my days in secondary school when we studied the basic Science subjects especially Chemistry and the topic Distillation. Distillation entails the separation of one form of liquid from the other. Our textbooks presented in graphic pictures how mixed liquids could be separated through the process of distillation resulting in some coming below the other on account of their properties. Different layers were evident, and the authors used separate colours to highlight the demarcations. The Nigerian society in which we live is no doubt enveloped in corruption and we must as a people arise to defeat this scourge.

Corruption is a word that we have become so accustomed with in Nigeria; it will not be surprising if corruption is among the first few complex words of a baby. If we decide to check most surveys why Nigeria is underdeveloped, top on the list would be “Corruption”. Corruption diffused into the Nigerian ethos has its tentacles from top government officials to minimum wage ranked workers. It has permeated all sectors of human enterprise, be it health, education, religion to mention a few. It seems like corruption has come to stay with Nigeria. Defining the term is a complex task in this side of the world especially when citizens have heterogeneous understanding of the term. This is evident when a then sitting President of Nigeria infamously said “stealing is not corruption” generating much reaction from the populace. In order to directly or indirectly exonerate oneself from corruption, a number of Nigerians see the act in everyone except themselves.

This presentation will address some of these questions that agitate our minds:

- What is corruption?
- What are some of the manifestations of corruption?
- Why has corruption become pervasive in our society?
- What impact does corruption have on our society and on us as individuals?
- What efforts have governments made to combat corruption and how successful are these efforts?
- Is there hope that we can defeat corruption in Nigeria?
- What realistic steps can we take to defeat the scourge of corruption?

Corruption explained

Corruption is a problem. In Management, a problem is perceived as a gap between where we are and where we want to be. Corruption is a term used to describe diverse acts of immorality, such as fraud, graft, bribery, stealing, perjury, lying, dishonesty, indiscipline, and debased act like sexual immorality or perversion. It is defined as “the non-violent criminal and illicit activity committed with objectives of earning wealth illegally either individually or in a group or organized manner thereby violating existing legislation governing the economic activities of government and its administration” (Iyanda, 2002). According to Transparency International, “Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. It can be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amounts of money lost and the sector where it occurs.” Grand corruption is said to destroy the operation of state for the benefit of leaders at the expense of the public. Petty corruption is the abuse of power by low and middle level officials in dealing with the public while political corruption is “manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedures in the allocation of resources by decision makers who abuse their position to sustain their power, status and wealth”. Corruption has also been classified into petty, ordinary and grand by a leading legal scholar, Professor Akin Oyeboade but in Adeniyi Akintola SAN considers the categorisation as unnecessary and purely academic. To him, “corruption is corruption. A thief is a thief. The magnitude or quantum of the items stolen is immaterial” (Akintola, 2010).

Corruption and its impacts

Corruption brings hardship. It is clear to all and sundry that the present time is a difficult period indeed: a period of economic downturn in our society; a period of partial and irregular

payment of salary to worker; a period where university and graduates of tertiary institutions are engaged in barbing, laundry, bead designs and other small businesses to float above poverty level. According to a report released by Brookings Institution, a non-profit public policy organisation based in Washington, DC, America, Nigeria is claimed to have overtaken India as the country with the largest number of extremely poor in early 2018 with six persons becoming poor every minute (Vanguard Newspaper, 2018). Although the Federal Government of Nigeria has dismissed this report, no one can deny that there is abject poverty in our land.

Other consequences of corruption include:

- Poor health care systems.
- Poor educational system.
- High unemployment rate.
- Poor infrastructure which hinders the ease of doing business.

The Root of Corruption

A vexed question we may ask in terms of the present state of corruption in Nigeria is “Why are we here?” Surely, we have not always been this bad. We are here because we have lost our values. Our society drifted from the path of honour and rectitude by choosing to worship at the altar of materialism; by choosing mammon above God. We are here because we stopped asking questions. We are here because we have mortgaged our conscience. In the past the society was interested in how a person became wealthy and they understood it was by a gradual process. The idea of sudden wealth was considered totally unacceptable. Sudden wealth did not only attract societal condemnation, it would also attract ostracization by honest members of the immediate society. The belief widely held was that a sudden millionaire must have engaged in some nefarious activities which harmed the society gravely. These acts could include ritual killing, fraud, abduction, kidnapping, currency counterfeiting and smuggling.

The failure of the government to use the instrumentality of the law to punish corrupt persons is largely responsible for its pervasiveness in our society. Where corrupt persons are not named and shamed many are not deterred. The fact that corrupt persons are prominent among those who have the financial muscle to commit huge resources to electioneering campaigns or to sponsor many candidates for elections makes successive governments to look the other way when they should have fronted confronted the problem.

Efforts of Government

In Nigeria, access to state office is generally considered as a veritable means to money. This is most unfortunate. A common terminology adopted in the anti-corruption war is “politically exposed persons”. This refers to holders of public offices who are exposed to state fund and could be tempted to dip their hands into state coffers because of their exposure. The stand of government may be said to be ambivalent regarding corruption. Governments make the loudest noise about corruption. At the same time our most corrupt institutions are within the corridors of government. Our laws have always punished corruption. Since the restoration of democratic governance in 1999 new laws have been made and new institutions established to combat corruption. These institutions are the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Fiscal Responsibility Commission. The activities of these bodies and some other agencies of government including the Nigeria Police Force have resulted in the conviction of some corrupt persons. Public perception about the role of government is that it could have done more if it is keenly interested in fighting corruption.

Weak institutions, lack of transparency and infrastructural decay fester corrupt practices. Let us take for instance application for a driver’s licence or international passport. Do we have advertised checklists? Is the process transparent enough? Is there a timeline that is known to all? In some countries these applications are corruption free. Can we say the same about Nigeria? Why must one know someone who knows someone before approaching the

responsible agencies? Why should passport officials travel at their own expense to collect copies of international passports in Abuja? Why should there be any form of cash transactions in passport offices when there are government accounts to which money can be paid?

There is no doubt if government is seriously interested in eliminating or reducing corruption its agencies must be more transparent in their dealings with the public.

Is there hope for Nigeria?

Nigeria was once rated as the most corrupt nation on earth. As we can see from the most recent Corruption Perception Index of the Transparency International, the situation has slightly improved. However, the largest room in the world is that of improvement. As indicated earlier, once upon a time corruption was at its barest minimum in Nigeria. Farmers would leave their crops and stones to indicate prices and buyers would leave the appropriate sum which no one would steal before the return of the farmer/seller. Our rulers were truly leaders who did not indulge themselves in office. Compensation for political office holders was modest. A governor abandoned the building of a personal house as he could not reconcile that with building state infrastructure. Access to public offices was not synonymous with access to state funds. As an optimist I think we can hope against hope. Nigeria can be great again, but this requires our collective efforts.

Lift-Up Your Heads

Psalm 24: 7 and 8 say:

Lift up your heads o ye gates, and be lifted up ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is the King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.

The head is a significant part of our body; one may in fact say the most significant as no one can function without the head. Though our hearts are locked in our chests, our thinking faculty, the seat of our Central Nervous System, is in our head. The head coordinates every aspect of the human body. Our hearing, sight, taste and external breathing organs are all found in the head. If we can raise our heads then there is a strong likelihood we would not be drowned in the tempestuous storm of corruption and would not ingest or be forced to sip the murky, coloured and contaminated water of corruption. If we can raise our heads above corruption-coloured water, there is also hope our entire body can swim out of the ocean of corruption.

Individual righteousness contributes to the aggregate righteousness of a group of people. We must begin to combat the menace of corruption at the individual level. This means as individual citizen we must do the following:

- Embrace the value of contentment and abhor greed and selfishness. 1 Timothy 6: 6 ***Godliness with contentment is great gain.*** Proverbs 16:8: ***Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.***
- Embrace the value of accountability and abhor impunity.
- Embrace the virtue of Omoluabi which abhors all forms of immorality and revels in ill-gotten wealth. A popular folklore taught in Primary Schools in the past is “***Iseloogunise***” by J. F. Odunjo. This poem emphasises some societal values including hard work, industry and honesty.

Conclusion

From the above, we can conclude that we owe ourselves and the future generation a duty to stem the tide of corruption which is determined to drown us. This battle must necessarily begin from the level of the individual though it does not end there as the individual lives in a society which has a basic responsibility to provide an environment conducive for human existence and sustenance. Everyone must strive to make a difference within his or her area of influence: we must shun corruption. Making a difference starts with having the correct

perspective of life. In the perilous times in which we find ourselves, the Bible highlights the aspirations many will pursue. They will become “lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud...” (2 Timothy 3:2). There is no better message that cautions the selfishness and greed of man than the realisation that a day will come when all our material acquisitions will mean nothing to us. The Bible says “If in this life only we have our hope in Christ, we are of all men the most miserable” I Cor. 15:19.

Thank you for your attention.

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