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Opinion – Nigeria’s Stagnation on Anti-Corruption Links with Growing Insecurity

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UCHE IGWE, FEB 18 2023

In January 2023, the global anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International released its annual corruption perception index (CPI), which ranks the perceived level of public sector corruption across 180 countries worldwide. This year’s report painted a grim picture that revealed that many countries have yet to progress in the fight against corruption since 2017. Nigeria is one of the countries that fell into this category despite being led by a government that promised radical reforms and a President with perceived anti-corruption credentials.

Mohammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, was elected in 2015 after he defeated incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan partly because he promised to stamp out corruption from Africa’s biggest economy. Interestingly, Mr Buhari continues to receive accolades across the continent as an anti-corruption icon, while the reality at home remains pathetically different. However, despite the tough rhetoric and grandstanding, corruption continues to grow in leaps and bounds while the President sits helplessly as anti-corruption became a weapon deployed for partisan ends. The verdict is that corruption is waxing stronger under President Buhari.

The report reveals a clear connection between violence and corruption, something that is obvious but rarely interrogated. The Nigerian experience confirms that governments plagued by corruption increasingly lack the capacity to protect the people and witness several forms of criminality and insurrection. Despite spending billions of dollars (eight trillion naira in seven years) ostensibly to fight insecurity both at national and sub-national levels, insecurity continues to worsen.

With growing weak institutions and poor oversight, Nigerian security forces are not sufficiently trusted across the population to be neutral and professional in the performance of their duties. This partly contributed to the widespread protest against police brutality known as #ENDSARS, which almost brought the country to a halt. Cases of banditry, kidnapping and terrorism have become frequent across the whole country. The security agencies have not done much, as some parts of the country are currently under the control of terrorists and bandits who collect tax from farmers. There were even instances where the kidnapped victims spoke of collaboration between the state security agencies and the kidnappers.

To many analysts, the grim performance of Nigeria was unsurprising and clearly points to the unsavory situation in the country. In 2022 alone, media reports insist that about 4,545 persons were killed while another 4,611 were kidnapped by non-state actors. Gunmen have successfully attacked several government buildings and churches across the country, killing many. The young people are very angry, partly a result of the government’s inability to protect lives and properties, endangering citizens. Terrorists, bandits and criminal organizations across the country have been emboldened. Citizens, regardless of location, live in constant fear while corrupt officials thrive in impunity.

So far, the fight against insecurity has yielded limited results. There are accusations that some security personnel have converted into a flourishing enterprise and conflict economy that instead provides incentives for the beneficiaries of the status quo. Furthermore, the Government Defense Integrity Index published in 2020 reveals that Nigeria faces a high risk across its defense institutions with minimal controls in operations. The country ranks 143 out of 163 on the Global Peace Index in 2022, alongside nations like Iran, Cameroun and Columbia.

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Written by Uche Igwe

Some sections of the media and civil society who misunderstood the CPI results have tried to hoodwink the public to misinterpret the change in ranking as an improvement in Nigeria’s fight against corruption. This inference is not only false but also misleading. The score is an indication of stagnation. In measuring the perception of corruption using CPI, a change in ranking is an inconsequential factor dependent on the number and performance of other countries ranked. A change of ranking from 154 to 150 does not amount to progress in any way. The CPI score for Nigeria remains the same at 24. This is a clear reduction from the average score of 27 that it used to be during the Jonathan administration. The score rose to 28 in 2016 and later dropped to 24.

For the score to drop by three points under an administration that was elected under the assumption that it would fulfil its promise to fight corruption speaks a lot about the level of failure that has led to general disappointment, lingering scepticism and growing restlessness among citizens. Applauding the score is like a child repeating the same class and celebrating that you are now two seats closer to the teacher. Even Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, improved their score from 16 to 24 while remaining on the same ranking.

With Nigeria’s Presidential elections imminent, many observers are keen to reflect on whether and to what extent the eventual outcome could speak to the citizens’ frustration as to how the growing public sector corruption has impacted the livelihood of ordinary citizens. At least two of the top contenders for the office of the President allegedly have a past that is linked to corruption and drug peddling.

Historically these issues do not matter much in a country whose desperately poor citizens are content with crumbs that fall off from the exotic dining tables of the rich, and in which dubious politicians are likely funded by stolen public resources. A section of the population led by vocal, media-savvy young people remains adamant, hopeful that their votes will count and the long-awaited change may be on the way. Their optimism is anchored on amendments of the Electoral Act which introduced a technology that transmits votes electronically. On the other hand, established politicians are said to be doing everything necessary to ensure that the status quo remains, including stashing away billions of naira to buy votes on Election Day. The stage is set and the clock is ticking. How either of these mutually opposing efforts will fare remains a subject of speculation.

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