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## Corruption, Democracy, and Insecurity in Nigeria

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As a part of a [Forum Series on Democracy and Insecurity in Africa](#), Professor Wale Adebani made a presentation on March 7, 2017 on “African Labyrinths: Corruption, Democracy, and Insecurity in Africa.” He is the noted author of several books on this topic. [\[1\]](#) In September 2011, Prof. Adebani and Prof. Ebenezer Obadare convened a conference on Prebendalism and Democracy in Lagos which led to a well-received edited book. [\[2\]](#) On the eve of assuming the prestigious position of Rho

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**Professor of Race Relations at Oxford University, Prof. Adebani shared with the audience his insights into the issue of corruption, which is impeding the building of democracies and inclusive economies in Nigeria and elsewhere.**



Professor Wale Adebani

Why, Prof. Adebani asked, has democracy in Nigeria not resulted in greater transparency, less corruption, a greater supply of public goods, and reduced insecurity? Nigeria is an interesting case to examine. The country has little to show for its abundant natural resources and its large population.

Despite having the largest economy on the continent, Nigeria scores poorly on world indices for poverty, standard of living, and corruption. African countries that place highest on the corruption index are also lowest on the standard of living index. 112 million Nigerians live at or below the poverty line. The country ranks 156 out of 166 on the human development index. The dominant

motif in Nigerian politics is corruption, and that is why the country is still floundering.

Why has political venality increased? Anti-corruption efforts of all kinds have failed. A popular term used to describe the endemic corruption in Nigerian life is “settlement.” This practice soared under the regime of military ruler Ibrahim Babangida, 1985 – 1993, and was further entrenched under his dictatorial successor, Sani Abacha. It became a central vector of statecraft. Democracy scholar Larry Diamond contends that corruption should be made a crime against humanity. During his term as head of the military government in 1984-85, then General Muhammadu Buhari sought to prosecute the entire corrupt political class.

There have been two key responses to corruption in Nigeria. The first is a technical approach that seeks a technical/governmental solution. From this perspective, the problem can be solved by good leadership and governance. In 2016, no highly-placed Nigerian was convicted of corruption despite multiple seizures of assets. The second key response is to regard the problem as structural and systemic in nature. A compositional defect of Nigeria itself has fostered more corruption and incompetence. There is a fundamental flaw in Nigeria that requires a radical break from the past. The whole apparatus of political rule needs to be reconstructed. The Nigerian system is unsustainable.

The privileged have incentives to retain their privileges through corruption. The oil economy has been cited as the sole reason for Nigeria’s continued national existence. The current government is again a “government of settlement,” of patrimonialism. Nigerian rulers have arrogated to themselves the right to act in ways counter to the public interest. This makes it impossible for regular people to enjoy the benefits of the oil industry. The government is therefore obliged to “settle” them.

In the case of the Niger Delta conflicts, as settlement has become the core element of statecraft, institutions such as OPADEC and NNDC are intended to “settle people,” rendering these organizations “cesspools of corruption.” [3] The revenue-sharing formula has allocated 13% of the distributable pool of oil revenues to the Delta states. The consequence has been the emergence of governors such as James Ibori of Delta state and Diepreye Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa state, both ensnared in mega-corruption and money-laundering.

Former president Umaru Yar’Adua offered amnesty for the combatants in the Niger Delta. The settlement involved led to the emergence of multi-millionaires. One mechanism was the giving of contracts to militants to protect the pipelines. In 2015, a new group, the Niger Delta

Avengers, resumed the insurgency. The Niger Delta problem has been treated as a technical problem requiring a technical solution. The fundamental problem, however, is the poverty in the region. Boko Haram could morph into another insurgency, similar to how it evolved from an earlier one, the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s.

The Nigerian state is no longer seen as legitimate. The poverty rate in the country's northeast—the center of Boko Haram—is 76%, while that in the Northwest is 80%. Armed insurgencies have become contractors of the state. Each successive president approaches what are really brain tumors as if they are migraines. The war against Boko Haram persists. It has not been defeated and probably will not be in the next couple of years. The inability of the government to deal with this challenge is telling. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, “Boko Haram has overtaken ISIS as the deadliest terrorist group,” responsible for more deaths than the latter in 2015. [4]

Elections provide a route, just like a military coup, to take control of the resources of the state via the capture of prebends for self-settling. If Boko Haram and other insurgent groups did not exist, the Nigerian government would have had to invent them. They become means of looting the treasury in the name of “national security challenges.” The fundamental rationale is extracting resources. International anti-corruption agencies have ignored the interwoven dynamics of corruption and social inequality. The higher the corruption, the lower the degree of social inclusion, and hence the greater the insecurity.

Structural change is blocked by the ruling party because it would upend their exploitative mechanisms and allow for the redistribution of resources. Nigeria will not endure much longer unless there is a rethinking of the nature of the state. A new system must be built in which there are incentives for people to comply with desired ethical norms. Structural transformation will require changing the constitution of Nigeria. Prebendalism is part of the fundamentally flawed logic. Right now, electoral politics are impossible without corruption.





Nigerians protesting over the rising levels of corruption in the country. *Bublbe*

## Responses to Adebawwi

### *John Campbell*

Only with a thorough analysis of what is going can we get to where we want to be. Corruption keeps Nigeria going; it is what makes the country work. Without corruption, Nigeria would collapse. Like Adebawwi, I see a distinction between a technical problem and a systemic one.

The standard response in Nigeria is: "we need another national conference." But none has worked so far. The entire elite is complicit in the system. How do you prosecute an entire elite? Its members control the instruments of power. How do you move against an elite with such power without a revolution?

We can discuss Boko Haram and the Niger Delta insurgency in that framework. If either is eliminated, it will re-emerge in a different form under a different name. How do you solve the Niger Delta problem? You pay everybody off. But then, civilian task forces will ask for an even bigger payoff. The question becomes: how does Nigeria escape from this labyrinth? How can its friends help, and not hurt, in the process?

## ***Juliet Sorensen***

There does appear to be a correlation between lower levels of corruption and democracy, but it is not a super strong one. What are the causes of corruption? Patrimonial relationships between government and societies have continued for generations. We can distinguish grand from petty corruption. Street-level corruption is just as common as shakedowns and handouts at higher levels. They are sustained by culture and tradition and low public sector wages.

The costs of corruption must be noted. Economic growth is stifled as corruption acts as a tax, deterring potential foreign investments. It generates an entangled bureaucracy. For the average person, corruption reduces morale; it is seen as a way of cutting ahead in the line. As corruption spreads, it widens income inequality. In many cases, legal and enforcement mechanisms exist on paper but frequently do not work.

## ***Richard Joseph***

Ghana celebrated yesterday its 60th anniversary of independence. Even after sustaining its constitutional democracy for almost 25 years, however, many Ghanaians believe that their political system is failing them. Corruption and poor service delivery is as much an issue there as in Nigeria.

Economic progress usually involves removing hurdles and barriers. I have described Nigeria as a “tollgate” society. Tollgates appear in many forms. Policemen shakedown vehicle drivers. Airport workers ask for bribes. In whatever agency or operation an individual is inserted, a tollgate is erected, to temporarily impede rather than facilitate transactions.

## **Q & A**

***Is there one action that can move the needle just a bit?***

- *Campbell*: Nigeria is a profoundly religious society. Issues can be framed in religious terms. Events open and close with a prayer, given by persons of different religious denominations. Perhaps this religiosity can be harnessed to attack corruption.
- *Adebanwi*: There was a time when the solution was seen in finding the right leader. Now people realize that finding such a leader is impossible. Before it was building a democracy, but that hasn't worked. Now, we must rethink the ideas and ideals that led to independence.
- *Sorensen*: An independent media and free press can play an important role in this process.

### ***Have there been attempts made elsewhere from which lessons can be drawn?***

- *Adebanwi*: Nigeria had one of the most efficient bureaucracies in the 1960's and 70's. Its institutions were vibrant and free, but dictators destroyed them, one by one. There needs to be a recomposition of power. The people in charge of oil, for example, are simply stealing it.
- *Campbell*: A successor to the view that good leadership and leaders can lead to salvation has been replaced by a hope for free and fair elections. But that hasn't resulted in good government. Self-censorship is the dictator's goal. Religious sentiment is genuine. It is shared by many people and can be used.
- *Adebanwi*: We should not overlook how Nigerian religiosity is manipulated by preachers for their material benefit, and how it is spurred by widespread economic distress.
- *Joseph*: Corruption and oligarchy are global phenomena today. The world seems to be moving further along the path Larry Diamond described in a 2008 article, "The Democratic Rollback: The Resurgence of the Predatory State." [5] The more predation in government, the less the supply of public goods and services, the greater individual and group insecurity, and the more intense the conflicts. This vicious cycle is undermining prospects for democratic development in Nigeria and much of Africa.

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[1] Two such books are *Nation as Grand Narrative: The Nigerian Press and the Politics of Meaning*, University of Rochester Press, 2016 and *Authority Stealing: Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics in Post-Military Nigeria*, Carolina Academic Press, 2011.

[2] *Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013

[3] The Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), established in 1992 and 2000 respectively, represent the most notable official responses to the poverty, infrastructure decay, and ethnic conflict in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

[4] See the Institute for Economics and Peace [2015 Global Terrorism Index](#).

[5] "The Democratic Rollback: The Resurgence of the Predatory State," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008