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Dealing corruption a deadly blow

Muhammadu Buhari won the Nigerian presidency on an anti-graft ticket. His resolve is clear, but are his efforts paying off?

'Corruption will kill Nigeria If Nigeria does not kill corruption'. It was these uncompromising words, uttered ahead of the 2015 presidential elections, that helped candidate Muhammadu Buhari win a decisive victory at the ballot box.

He appeared to possess the missionary zeal necessary to combat the corruption that's corroding Nigeria from the inside. After more than two years in office, President Buhari will be the first to admit that fighting corruption is easier said than done.

Rich rewards for whistle-blowers

Making good on his campaign promise, Buhari appointed an advisory anti-corruption panel, headed by professor and human rights activist Itse Sagay. He encouraged the leading anti-graft agencies, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to go after suspects, arraigning a record number and recovering some $10 billion of looted public funds, according to Transparency International (TI).

Buhari also enforced a law that predated him in office but which had not been implemented: the Treasury Single Account, under which all government revenues must be deposited into one central account.

Last year, the government introduced a whistle blower policy which has proved effective in unveiling illegally acquired assets hidden by civil servants and politicians.

Thanks to the carrot of hefty pay-outs for information that leads to a successful discovery, large sums of foreign and local currency notes have been found in the unlikeliest of places: mortuaries, septic tanks, water reservoirs, warehouses, and in posh residential apartments.

There are other encouraging signs. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, the state oil company known for its questionable dealings, has undergone a makeover and is beginning to render regular accounts. On January 18, the parliament passed new laws – 17 years in the making – aimed at promoting transparency in the industry.

Buhari, meanwhile, signed several agreements with foreign countries to facilitate the seizure and return of Nigerian assets illegally stored abroad.

Corruption fights back

Unsurprisingly, corruption has refused to surrender without a fight. Critics of the government and opposition politicians have mounted a strident attack on the government's campaign through traditional and social media. They charge the government of targeting only opposition party members, while shielding its own members from scrutiny.

It's unclear as yet which side has the momentum. Buhari lost some of his moral authority after the Secretary to the Government, a close ally, was fired on corruption charges.

Opponents have also accused him of appointing to strategic military and civilian positions members of his northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, shutting out Igbos from the southeast, the group that gave him the fewest votes in 2015.

Lessons from the neighbours

Nigeria, like Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania, has not managed to improve its anti-corruption score by a 'statistically significant amount' on TI's global index. Smaller sub-Saharan nations led by Botswana, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Rwanda and Senegal have fared much better.

According to TI, African governments need to 'take bold steps to ensure rule of law is the reality for everyone. Prosecuting corruption will restore faith among people who no longer believe in the institutions that are supposed to protect them.'

It says transparency and accountability, still far from the norm in Africa, must go hand in hand in the fight against corruption, and recommends strengthening institutions like Nigeria's EFCC and ICPC, the judiciary and the police, and increasing their independence. Most of these agencies are poorly funded, limiting their ability to hire staff of a decent calibre.

Turning to the judiciary, reform must continue at a faster pace. It is embarrassing to see how courts are brazenly being used to delay and frustrate corruption trials. Many cases are badly prosecuted or prolonged to ensure justice is not served. Judgements are questionable. The judiciary has at least sanctioned the creation of special courts to ensure corruption cases conclude more quickly.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't write off Buhari's accomplishments, however modest. While Nigeria's war on corruption is yielding mixed result at home, it is receiving plaudits abroad. The African Union has even made Buhari the face of its 2018 anti-corruption campaign.

But the willingness of his fellow heads of state to join the campaign remains in doubt. Too often it is they that profit from the endemic corruption that leaves their citizens impoverished and ensures human suffering and human rights abuses continue.



Paul Okolo
Abuja

Paul Okolo is a freelance journalist and communications consultant based in Abuja, Nigeria. He has worked for news organization including Voice of America, Bloomberg, Reuters and the Inter-Press Service among others. He has a Master's in Journalism from Cardiff University in the U.K.