

In May 2007, Umaru Yar'Adua succeeded Olusegun Obasanjo as president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Many citizens wondered what direction the new government's war against corruption would take. The regrettable answer quickly became clear: The new administration has shown no desire to carry on with the previous administration's war on corruption.

The first signal that Yar'Adua's government was not going to continue the crusade was the administration's slow prosecution of corruption-related cases. The Obasanjo administration had promised that many governors still in office at the time would face trial after their tenure was over. After Obasanjo's exit, however, Yar'Adua, who had also been a governor, decided to look the other way, rather than go ahead with the trials.

Corruption Comes into the Open

Confirmation that the war on corruption had been short-circuited came in August 2007.

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) had been set up by the Obasanjo administration to combat graft and corruption among public officials. Everyone agreed that Nuhu Ribadu, its chair, was the spearhead in the fight against corruption. But the Yar'Adua government instead removed him from office that summer and asked him to take a course at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies. Outcry against this change included the argument that Ribadu, because of his leadership of the anti-graft agency, had no need for any kind of training that would warrant his unceremonious removal. Others argued that the course could have been delayed until the end of his tenure in another three years.

The administration's next moves dealt the deathblow to any government engaged in the fight against corruption. Ribadu's assistant, Ibrahim Lamorde, was initially asked to act as chair of the anti-graft agency while Ribadu was taking the course, but Lamorde was soon replaced with Farida Waziri, a retired police officer who allegedly had links with one of the governors whom the agency was prosecuting for corruption.

A few months later, the government compounded Ribadu's problems by demoting him and his colleagues from assistant inspector generals of police to deputy commissioners. Many saw the policy change as directed against Ribadu.

Among those riled by the action was Gani Fawehinmi, chair of the National Conscience Party, who is also a senior advocate of Nigeria and a human rights activist. He described the actions against Ribadu as “absolutely bizarre.” In condemning the government’s decisions, he added, “I want President Umaru Yar’Adua to realize that any government that punishes honesty sows the seed of its own destruction by corruption. The ‘offenses’ that brought these atrocious and oppressive actions of the federal government down on Ribadu’s head are his honest character and his unprecedented arrest, arraignment and trial of some powerful big men for corruption.”

Fawehinmi added that the demotion was “ridiculous, vindictive, a dangerous signal, and a serious contradiction on the part of government.”

A Blow to Public Opinion

Nigerian citizens’ positive opinions regarding the new government dwindled away. Many considered the demotion as punishment against the one man they hoped could clean the country of corruption. Many also saw the demotion as a go-ahead for public officials to continue their looting without fear of prosecution. Nigerians also believe that since Yar’Adua’s government came to power, public officials’ brazen pillaging of their country’s treasury has increased because corrupt officials believe they are no longer being watched by any serious anti-graft agency. While these allegations are rarely, if ever, supported by hard evidence, public frustration is growing.

Among the frustrated is Kayode Komolafe, a senior Nigerian journalist. According to him, “It is a symptom of a moral crisis for a society when someone like Ribadu is rewarded for his patriotism and commitment with the sort of denigration and harassment being visited on him. By this act, the Yar’Adua administration is unwittingly giving credence to the legendary cynicism of Nigerians that their country is not worth dying for.

“In many respects, the anti-corruption campaign is essentially a moral one. It is not just a legal matter. But how can that campaign be enhanced when the man who redefined the campaign by his courage and commitment is now hounded like a criminal, while those who have questions to answer about what they did with people’s resources are strutting through the corridors of power continuing to peddle their influence?”

Corruption Continues

The relentless trashing of the war on corruption continues. The government recently arrested and detained another senior official of the EFCC for allegedly possessing vital documents and files that the government feared would wind up in the hands of the press or non-governmental organizations. The documents allegedly back up the agency's cases against many of the indicted politicians that the agency would have loved to prosecute. Instead, these politicians are being shielded by the Yar'Adua government, critics contend.

Public affairs commentator Kolade John also believes the government has turned its back on fighting corruption: "The government has not been serious about the war against corruption. Ribadu told the nation before the 2007 elections that none of the 26 or so governors that the EFCC has found corrupt had been sentenced and that those who were undergoing trial either have been set free or had their cases delayed by officials. How can you convince people that corruption does not pay and that such crimes will be punished while officials flaunt their ill-gotten wealth and taunt us with it every day? People are not going to jail. Rather, they are traveling from one capital of the world to the other, spending their loot while the country, a top oil producer, cannot provide electricity and other basic amenities for its citizens. It is a shame," John said in an interview.

Indeed, in March 2008, the EFCC and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Offenses Commission (ICPC) estimated that more than 600 billion naira (US\$5 million) had been stolen from the country's treasury.

How do you fight this monster? Justice Emmanuel Ayoola, chair of the ICPC says, "The best way to win the war against corruption is to transform the people. And I say the surest way to transform people is to have a caring government that will put the people at the forefront of its responsibilities." But a caring government is definitely not what Nigeria has now. So has the country lost this war? Many citizens would answer yes.

