

By Akin Olaniyan

Escaping the world of “unofficial charges” is difficult, if not impossible, for the average Nigerian. Almost everyone pays bribes on some level: Professionals, politicians and even youth are wrapped up in a system estimated to have cost Nigeria more than 12 trillion naira (US\$100 billion) in illicit money transfers alone.

After the embarrassing disclosure that the late military ruler Sani Abacha and his close aides looted the treasury of 282 billion nairas (US\$2.2 billion)—this in a country where an estimated 70 percent of the population lives on less than 128 naira (US\$1) a day—it looked like Nigerians were finally determined to confront corruption.

The decision to deal with the problem won praise at home and abroad. Due-diligence initiatives have saved government funds, while fiscal responsibility laws and the establishment of budget and planning offices at the ministry of finance show promise. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), under the leadership of Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, won respect by arresting previously untouchable Nigerians.

But seven years into President Olusegun Obasanjo’s government, doubts remain as to the anti-corruption campaign’s effectiveness. The unexpected reassignment of widely respected Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and her subsequent resignation from the cabinet raised questions about the government’s commitment to accountability. Perhaps most importantly, one still has the impression that Nigerians are willing to take risks at even the smallest chance to make fast money.

Such was the conclusion I reached after a run-in with police in April 2006. It was mid-morning on a Saturday and I was driving to a shopping complex on Victoria Island off the capital city of Lagos. Realizing too late that I had driven past the complex, I turned and headed back only to be stopped by a one-armed policeman. My offense: driving against traffic on a one-way road, for which offenders are fined 25,000 naira (about US\$193). As usual, the fine was negotiable. I was allowed to go without a bribe, having identified myself as a journalist, but as I drove back home I was reminded that those who fight corrupt practices have their work cut out for them.

When I needed a new car, like most Nigerians who cannot afford new ones, I hired a car dealer to go across the border to Benin to arrange a used car for me. His charges included a fee to pay a customs official to escort the car into Nigeria.

Registering the car followed a similar pattern. For a premium on the official license fee of 2,000 naira (US\$15), I could get my registration the same day, compared to a wait of three days to a week. Call it a gift or bribe: Nigerians know money works wonders, and in most cases, people choose to pay with few questions asked.

This is certainly the case for Nigerian university students. On most campuses, students who buy books or handouts published by lecturers are guaranteed as much as a 20-point markup on their final examination. Most students simply choose the easier route to good grades.

I myself have faced a frustrating time determining what happened to some 18,000 naira (about US\$139) I paid for my electricity bill for my three-bedroom apartment between April 2004 and April 2006. The amount is still reflected on current bills as unpaid. I was advised to write to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), but almost 10 months later, the officials still couldn't find an explanation, except to say that it was not an uncommon case.

With their high-profile scandals involving enormous amounts of money, one would think common Nigerians were saints compared to government officials. The most significant recent scandal involved President Obasanjo's alleged attempt to induce National Assembly members to extend his term by paying them each 50 million naira (more than US\$387,000). Professor Shola Adeyeye, a House of Representatives member from Osun State, insists that the money changed hands, despite strong denials by government officials.

Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, the former governor of Bayelsa State, was arrested by police in London in September 2005 for money laundering offences and detained for 66 days. Alamieyeseigha's escape and sudden reappearance in the Bayelsa state capital of Yenagoa two months later remains as controversial as it was daring. Accused of enriching his immediate family with government funds, he was later removed as governor and is now standing trial in a Nigerian court in an unprecedented case.

The recent arrest and arraignment of two aides for Ekiti State Governor Ayo Fayose on charges of misappropriating 1.25 billion naira (US\$9.6 million) from the state's Integrated Poultry Project might lack the drama of the Alamieyeseigha case, but is intriguing nonetheless. The aides, Goke Olatunji and Gbenga James, face 15 counts of money laundering and corrupt enrichment. The governor's fate is unclear. Twenty-four other governors out of 36 have been investigated for similar cases and may be arraigned at the end of their tenure next year, according to the EFCC.

The EFCC chairman said the agency has done its job well, citing as evidence the recovery of some 513 billion nairas (US\$4 billion) from corrupt officials. Not everyone is impressed, however. General Ishola Williams of Transparency International's Nigeria office said the government cannot win the "war on corruption:" It is Nigerian citizens who must be determined to reduce corruption.

"There is an apparent political will: Anti-corruption agencies can bark and bite and they seem to have good leadership," said Williams, but pointed out that their efforts are undermined by Obasanjo's refusal give the agencies independence or funding, in addition to blocking a freedom of information bill.

Echoing these sentiments, Adeyeye said winning the war against corruption was proving difficult because of reluctance to slay Nigeria's "sacred cows." However, he noted that future administrations might have difficulty rolling back the small gains of the present anti-corruption campaign, such as the Nigeria Extractive Industries Initiative (NEITI). Obasanjo could further lock in these gains by submitting records of oil production and export to parliamentary oversight, Adeyeye said. The chances of that happening, however, are as small as the average Nigerian wage.