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Rethinking Public Administration Professionalism in Nigeria

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Abstract

The mission statement of Nigerian public administration anchors on providing a professional public administration fit for sound public sector management. Using a qualitative methodology that focuses on descriptive analysis, this paper examines professionalism of public administration in line with the various policy and regulatory frameworks put in place to enforce professional conducts. The impact of unprofessionalism in the Country's public administration is large scale unethical behaviors which has over the years resulted in the compromise of basic principles and values. This subverts the very essence of public administration existence in terms of providing efficient, responsible and professional service in line with sustainable public interest. The paper reflects on public administration practices, identifies some

obstacles to professionalism and amongst other propositions strongly recommends for good governance in the Country. The paper contributes to current discussions on enhancing professionalism of public administration in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Key words: professionalism, profession, public administration, public sector, service delivery,

Introduction

The Nigerian public administration is a deep reflection of the country's socio-political milieu. This context over the years have had effects and undesirable consequences for public administration thereby, resulting in series of unprofessional conducts that have hampered efficient and effective performance. This is despite the existence of basic constitutional provisions such as the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution (1999) which stipulates the code of conduct for public officers in the country. Article 15 of the fifth schedule of the constitution (1999) also provides for the existence of a 'Code of conduct Bureau and Act' with emphasis on maintaining high standard of morality in government business. On the other hand, the civil service handbook (1997) enumerates the roles of the civil servant and how government business should be conducted so as to address the needs of the people and also contains 'codes of ethics in government businesses with particular emphasis on the values of uprightness, discipline, equity etc. Recent reforms in public administration such as Dotun Phillips Study Group on the Review of the structure of the civil service (1985), Presidential Task Force on Civil Service Reforms (1985), Civil service Reform through decree no 43 (1988), and Allison Ayida Committee (1994) were aimed at addressing series of challenges like performance, professionalism and remunerations in the public service. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2001: 66) the 'recommendations of the reforms were directed at achieving a results-oriented civil service, imbued with ethical values'. The adoption of International Code of Conduct for Public Officials in 1996 (OECD 2000: 47-49), African Charter on public service (2001) and the African Charter on values and principles of public administration (2011) also conform to the present public administration reforms agenda aimed at professionalizing public administration in the country.

These frameworks have not provided reasonable panacea in addressing the challenges of professionalism, incompetence, lack of industry, accountability and transparency and most often the general insensitivity to service delivery issues that confront public administration in the country. At the centreline of these unprofessional dispositions is the dysfunctional political process with over-arching influence on public administration (OECD 2001:65; Adegoroye 2005:2; Gundu 2011:147). The impact is large scale unethical crisis which has over the years resulted in the compromise of basic principles and values and the neglect of professional and ethical standards thereby, subverting the very essence of its existence in terms of providing

efficient, responsible and professional service in line with sustainable public interests. The aggregation of socio-political influences coupled with low level of Public administration education and training have disposed public administration as being incapable and inefficient in addressing pressing public sector challenges. Professionalism is therefore, exigent in combating corruption, improving efficiency, resisting undue political influences and in adequately positioning public administration as a reliable institution of the state.

The Concept of Professionalism

Abundant literature exist as to the meaning and nature of professionalism. However, professionalism in itself suffers from definitional problems, and this is due to lack of general agreement on the definition of a profession (Burke 1988: 177). However, Lester (2010:2) defines a profession *'as a reasonably well-defined occupation that meets a defensible set of criteria for being a profession, whether those are derived from a social construct, trait or sociological perspective'*. Such identifiable criteria include: education founded on broad learning and culture, practical training and building expertise through experience, rational solution to problems and formal control of entry-routes (Lester 2010:3). The South African Social Science Professions cited in De vies and Steyn (2011: 686) also state that a profession must practice unique skills and knowledge to the benefit of individuals and society, and that there must be professional autonomy and code of ethics. A profession is therefore, characterized by such elements as occupation, education and training, code of behaviour and service to the public.

Professionalism therefore, derives from the notion of a 'profession' and represents the standard of practice. Rainey (1991:150) in the context views a profession as involving the application of a skill based on theoretical knowledge; intensive training at recognized educational institutions; organization into professional association; existence of a code of conduct enforced by statutory body and commitment to one's work as a calling.

From the foregoing, one deduces an important component of a profession as the existence of intellectual capacity which in the context enables for the proper identification and definition of professional goals. On similar ground, Benoit (1998: 33) writes that if professionalism refers to ongoing search for excellence in performance and quality of work in all its dimensions, respect for the client, a love for the product, a concern for detail, a taste for beauty, moral concerns, mutual assistance, updating of knowledge and skills, attention to tools, and especially the full development of the human being, then professional behaviour is proposed for the African civil servants (Nigeria inclusive). Professionalism in the context of public administration/public sector performance is viewed in terms of the overall principles and values that guide public service delivery such as loyalty, diligence, transparen-

efficiency, effectiveness, impartiality, commitment etc., and these are acquired through formal processes of education and training. Daniel and Rose (1991: 439) writes that professionalism presumes specialized knowledge resulting from formal education and training. As an occupation, public administration possesses such features as educational qualifications, exposures to training, work schedules, code of ethics/conduct, existence of professional bodies, recruitment and disciplinary procedures, mission statements that guide behaviour in terms of set goals etc. In view of this, Gilman (2005: 20) maintains that public administrators must believe that they are part of a profession with professional standards. United Nations (2000:5) also states that public service professionalism embraces the notion that those who join the public service need to be inculcated with shared values and trained in basic skills to professionally carry out official duties. It is therefore, in line with the foregoing that Obasanjo (1999) anchors his view of ideal public administration in the country on professionalism with the following elements:

- a competent, professional, development-oriented, public spirited and customer friendly civil service capable of responding effectively and speedily to the needs of the society;
- a civil service with the core values of political neutrality, impartiality, integrity, loyalty, transparency, professionalism and accountability
- a civil service that is guided by equity, where things are done the right way based on extant rules and regulations but with room for discretion, which should be exercised in public interest;
- creation of a suitable environment where civil servants are assured of protection and job security in the faithful discharge of their duties and responsibilities; and
- a competitively well remunerated and innovative civil service

Contextualizing Public Administration

Public administration has a two-pronged meaning- as a discipline and field of practice. As a discipline, Public Administration focuses on systematic examination of what happens in the field of public administration, and this implies that public administration as a practice has existed long before Public Administration as a discipline (Ijeoma, Nzewi & Sibanda 2013: 22-23). In the study context, it is referred to as a field of practice. However, as a field of practice, it is still not enough to wrap up in a simple definition such as ‘the execution of public affairs, by persons jointly engaged in working toward common goals’ (Cutchin, 1981:1) or ‘the functions or phenomena being practiced in a political environment, aimed at satisfying societal needs’ (Thornhill & Dijik 2010: 101) etc. Shafritz, Russel and Borick (2007:6) writes that public administration is so vast that there is no way to encompass it all with only

one definition. However, they clustered the definitions of public administration into four categories: political, legal, managerial and occupational (Shafritz et al, 2007).

Public administration is thus an old profession and has undergone different stages of development. Ijeoma (2013: 21) writes that what started on a minuscule scale by the ancient dynasties of Europe and Asia to service households and dynasties has grown and developed into a large institution dependent upon for carrying out government business all over the world. The institution of public administration is very strategic to countries in the sense that it is heavily relied upon for the management of policies. Section 169 of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (See sections 171,172,206,208, 318 and section 10 of Third Schedule as amended) identifies public administration as encompassing the Country's civil service (ministerial departments), statutory corporations or parastatals, judiciary, legislature, educational institutions, research institutions, wholly or principally owned by any of the three tiers of government, Nigeria Police or Armed forces, other security agencies, and other organizations in which the Federal or State governments owned controlling share or interest on. The country relies on these public administration institutions for the management of its policies in terms of serving the public interests, implementing and enforcing the socio-economic policies of the country, driving the country's developmental initiatives etc.

Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

This section identifies and discusses policy and regulatory frameworks which are of relevance to public administration professionalism in the country.

The Constitution. The fifth schedule of the 1999 Federal Constitution of Nigeria generally makes provision as regards code of conduct and work ethics for the public servant. Sections 1 to 10 of the schedule contains codes to guide the conduct of public officials with particular emphasis on how to avoid conflict of interests. It further makes provision for the existence of a 'Code of conduct' tribunal with the responsibility of prosecuting erring or non-compliant public servants. Generally, the section highlights on the following issues to sustain good conduct and bureaucratic ethics in public administration. These are:

- conflict of interests in the discharge of official duties
- double remunerations
- restriction on engaging on any private business except on part-time basis
- prohibition from receiving bribes or other form of gratifications
- engagement in any arbitrary act which is prejudicial to the rights of any person
- membership of any society which is incompatible to the functions and dignity of public office
- declaration of assets and liabilities on assumption of office

Code of Conduct Bureau. The provision of the powers of the bureau is retained in the Third and Fifth Schedules of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended) and Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal Act (2004). The vision is ‘rectitude in public office’ whereas ‘the aims and objectives is to maintain a high standard of morality in the conduct of government business and to ensure that the actions and behaviour of public officers conform to the highest standards of public morality and accountability’ (Code of Conduct Bureau, Cap C15, LFN 2004). The Code of Conduct Bureau has the mandate as specified under paragraph 3 of the Third Schedule of the Constitution (1999) to ensure that public servants in the three tiers of government adheres to the mandatory conducts in public service. The functions of the Bureau include:

- to receive assets declarations by public officers in accordance with provisions of the Act;
- to examine the assets declarations and ensure that they comply with the requirements of this Act and of any law for the time being in force;
- take and retain custody of such assets declarations;
- ensure compliance with and, where appropriate, enforce the provisions of the Code of Conduct or any law relating thereto;
- receive complaints about non-compliance with or breach of the provisions of the Code of Conduct, investigate complaints and where appropriate refer such matters to the Code of Conduct Tribunal (Constitution, 1999: Schedule 3)

It is therefore, important to note that the Code which is established by the Bureau serves as a vital tool in ensuring that public servants conform to the acceptable behaviours of public office as established by law. From the foregoing, one observes that the Code of Conduct for public servants in the Country focuses on the entrenchment and observance of basic principles in public life such as integrity, honesty, accountability, selflessness, probity, discipline etc.

The Public Service Rules

Chapter 4 of the Civil Service (Handbook, 2006) focuses on “Code of Ethics” in the public service. The Handbook lays emphasis on discipline, loyalty, honesty, courage, courtesy, cooperation, tact, industry, speedy execution of duties, efficiency, effectiveness, economy, kindness, equity and consideration in the discharge of official functions. The Handbook (2006) further lays emphasis on the following:

- discipline and strict adherence to the rules and regulations guiding the public service;
- diligence in the discharge of duties;
- shunning official misconducts such as demanding or receiving monetary or other form of material compensation for services rendered;
- broad-mindedness;

- abuse of power;
- promotion of national unity through public actions.

Agara and Omobolaji (2009:11) writes that the civil service handbook acts as a reference book and guide for all levels of personnel in the service. According to the United Nations (2001: 66) the Handbook states clearly that the civil servant must be well disciplined, the rules and regulations should be adhered to and service must be paramount. The book serves as a tool of keeping public servants on their toes in the discharge of official functions and further contains guidelines for appointments, remunerations, promotion and discipline.

Public service reforms

There has been series of reforms in the Nigerian civil service, the history which dates back to the pre-independence era. The essence has been to position the civil service on effective pedestal to address the myriad service delivery challenges confronting the country. According to the United Nations (2001: 65) the reforms include: the Harragin commission, 1946; Gorsuch commission, 1954; Newns committee, 1958/59; Mbanefo commission, 1959; Morgan salaries and wages commission, 1963; Elliot Grading team, 1966; Wey Panel on Public service management and salary administration, 1968; Adebo commission, 1971; Udoji Public Service Review commission, 1972; Dotun Phillips Panel, 1985; Presidential Taskforce on civil service, 1985; Civil Service reform through decree 43, 1988; Allison Ayida committee, 1994. Despite the political undertone of some of the reforms, they are generally aimed at improving performance in the public service. The recommendations were directed at achieving a results-oriented civil service, imbued with ethical values (United Nations, 2001:66).

Review of Public Service Rules and Regulations, 2005

A 13 –member Presidential Committee on the Review and Revision of Public Service Rules, Regulations and Procedures was constituted in 2005 with the following terms of reference:

- to work out transitional arrangements to facilitate on –going Public Service Reforms especially in the areas of recruitment/appointments, deployment, discipline, performance management etc.
- to study, analyze and review the existing Public Service Rules;
- to incorporate into the Revised Public Service Rules and Financial Regulations, other relevant rules and procedures that will ensure enforcement of compliance, strict observance of transparency, justice, equity, and accountability in the conduct of government businesses;

- to make appropriate recommendations that will ensure that the application of the Public Service Rules and Financial Regulations on public officers is consistent with the provisions of the Constitution; and
- to make any other recommendations on the Public Service Rules and Financial Regulations as may be deemed necessary (Adegoroye, 2005:6)

The key recommendations of the Committee amongst other issues contains provisions on appointments, recruitment, performance, discipline, management incentives and exit from the service. The Revised Rules are aimed at promoting sound public management and professionalism in the public service in line with acceptable global standards.

International Code of Conduct, 1996

As a member of the United Nations, Nigeria became a signatory to the International Code of Conduct for public officials. Amongst other concerns, posed by corruption, the Code focuses on measures to improve public administration and management and the strengthening of national capacities to prevent and control corruption as well as in upgrading skills of relevant personnel (United Nations 1996). Areas of focus are:

- General principles – a public office defined as a position of trust and implying a duty to act in the public interest; efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the discharge of duties
- Disclosure of assets – public officials shall in accordance with law declare or disclose their assets and liabilities
- Acceptance of gifts and other favors – officials shall not directly or indirectly receive gifts or other favors that may influence the exercise of their official functions
- Confidential information – matters of confidential nature must be kept confidential
- Political activity – the political or other activity of public officials outside the scope of their office shall in accordance with the law not impair on public confidence in the discharge of official duties.

Charter for the Public Service in Africa, 2001

Nigeria is a signatory to the Charter for the Public Service in Africa which was adopted by the Third Biennial Pan-African Conference of Ministers of Civil Service in Windhoek, Namibia. The Charter on public service resonates based on the political commitment by African Public Service Ministers at a previous conference to “to enhance professionalism and ethics in the public service in Africa” (Charter on Public Service in Africa, 2001). Halleon (2011:76) writes that the Charter on Public Service

in Africa is intended to consolidate rules for professional work ethic so that the public service becomes a veritable vector for development. The purpose of the Charter includes:

- Define the principles and general rules governing African public services with respect to transparency, professionalism and ethical standards;
- Give concrete expression to the commitment of African States to promote such values in the public service;
- Serve as a policy framework for the public service administration of all African countries and a source of inspiration for the development, strengthening or updating of national codes of conduct (Charter on Public Service in Africa, 2001: 3).

The imperativeness of this document is anchored on the strong commitment of African leadership to reposition and strengthen public administration to serve as vehicle of development and societal transformation. This can be done through respect of the basic core principles of effective public service. These principles are: equality; neutrality; legality and continuity (Charter on Public on Public Service in Africa, 2001: 4). The African Charter on Public Service was adopted in view of diverse service-related issues and challenges confronting African leadership in which public administration is designed to address.

African Charter on Values and Principles of Public Administration, 2011

The African Charter on Values and Principles of Public service and Administration was adopted during the 16th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, held on 31 January, 2011 at Addis Ababa. Nigeria is a signatory to this Charter which is a follow up on the Charter for the Public Service. It serves as a measure of sustaining the collective effort and support of African leadership to entrench codes and standards for public administration in Africa. According to the African Union (2011) “the Charter is an on-going collective efforts by Member States to improve public service delivery, combat corruption, protect the rights of citizens as users of public service as well as promote good governance and sustainable development on the Continent”. In the context, Chapter 111 of the Charter (2011), provides for Code of Conduct for Public Service agents, with emphasis on Professionalism, Ethical Behavior, Incompatibilities and conflict of Interest as well as Declaration of Assets. Tjihambuna (2012:3) states that the Charter was introduced with observation and acknowledgement that professionalism of the public service is a pre-requisite for the improvement of the State, which in turn, is necessary for the development of Countries.

Reflections on Public Administration

An interrogation of public administration practices in the Country reveals different faces of professional misconducts that contradict acceptable standards. For

instance, the incidence of police man receiving bribe to cover up criminal issue, teacher leaking examination questions or collecting money to pass students, judicial officer selling justice, health professional diverting medical supplies, public officer engaging in over-invoicing or inflation of contracts, superior demanding sex from subordinate to recommend her for promotion etc. These unprofessional conducts cut across the entire breadth of the Country's public administration. Ayanda (2012), Eghareva and Chiazor (2012), and Egwemi (2012) describe these misconducts as fraud, embezzlement, robbery, bribery, extortion, nepotism, influence peddling, indiscipline, mal-practices and betrayal of public confidence. All these are in line with the findings of the Ayida Committee (1994) which was instituted to review past reforms in the Public Service. The Committee identified the following as the major ills of the Public Service which has to be corrected. They are:

- politicization of the top hierarchy of the Civil Service;
- lack of financial accountability;
- perpetual breakdown of discipline;
- institutionalization of corruption at all levels and segments of the Public Service;
- disregard for rules and regulations;
- loss of direction;
- general decline of efficiency and effectiveness (Ayida Committee, 1994).

It is thus, noteworthy that more than two decades after the Committee findings, professional misconducts in public administration in the Country has risen in exponential form and with unguarded intensity. Despite the reforms, other government instituted campaigns such as the Ethical Revolution of former President Shehu Shagari in 1981, War against Indiscipline of 1984, and the existence of internal and international regulatory frameworks, the Public Service has been characterized by immeasurable level of misconduct. It is against this backdrop that former President Obasanjo (1999) lamented that "Government officials had become progressively indifferent to propriety of conduct and showed little commitment to promoting the general welfare of the people and public goods... Government and all its agencies had become corrupt and reckless". The impact of these misconducts are endemic with wide-range negative implications on service delivery and national development. Its prevalence affects the ability of people to access the basic services provided by the public administration institutions with widespread poverty, helplessness, denials and frustrations as consequences.

Indiscipline and disregard for rules affects the much needed level of institutional-capacity building necessary for the public servants to perform effectively and respond to the service delivery challenges of the Country. On the other hand, corruption and lack of financial indiscipline affects the ability of these institutions to

respond adequately to societal needs. It has resulted in the collapse or almost decay of the Country's infrastructures such as in the health, education, transport and other social services thereby, deepening the poverty level. For instance, the 2011 International Human Development Indicators classified Nigeria as one of the poorest countries of the world, with a multi-dimensional poverty index of 0.0310 and a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.459 which compares unfavorably to the world HDI average of 0.482 and 0.463 for sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2011 cited in Sanusi, 2011).

Leading to this scenario is the nature of public administration which cannot be viewed in isolation of the socio-political contexts of the Country. For instance, in the national public service, the introduction of the Federal character principle has resulted in an over-bloated public service. This most often results in the recruitment of unprofessional-minded personnel all in the bid of maintaining equal representation of units as against the merit principle which is based on education and competence. Akhakpe (2001) writes that the problem of unqualified, incompetent and poorly trained staff seriously negates achieving accountable and transparent public service in the Country. Another angle to this is the faulty placement of personnel, resulting in the appointment or recruitment of people to positions they either lack the relevant education or requisite skills for due to political factors. These factors negate the quest for professionalism in public administration which is rather anchored on excellence in performance through the application of skills founded on education and training and guided by the existence of code of conduct.

Challenges to Professionalism

The challenges to public administration professionalism in the Country remain undaunting despite existing policy and regulatory frameworks. These obstacles are discussed below.

Unethical Behaviors

Lawton (1999:299) views ethics as a set of principles, often defined as code or system that acts as guide to conduct. Unethical behavior is therefore, behavior that fails to comply with codes of ethics. Kinchin (2007:112) identifies the ethics of public service as based on the principles of fairness, transparency, responsibility, efficiency and no conflict of interest. However, these conditions lack in the system due to the absence of an "ethics infrastructure" or "national integrity system" (United Nations, 2000: 5). Most often there is the general acceptance of unethical behaviors (due to private gains) in cases of conflict with what is right in the interest of all.

Corruption

Corruption is a general case in the Country. Nye (1967:416) defines corruption as "behaviors that deviate from the formal duties of a public role because of private

gains". The prevalence of corruption is high in the Country. This condition is necessitated by a complex web of socio-economic factors arising from a general breakdown of law and order. When survival becomes the paramount value, corruption can become a way of life (United Nations, 2000).

Unprofessional Politics

The Human Rights Watch (2007) describes this as criminal politics. Politics in the country is not decently played. The emerging issues of clientelism, prebendalism and patrimonialism, undoubtedly, weighs down on behaviors in the public service.

Poor Working Conditions

Most often the conditions of service in the public service in comparison to what is obtainable in the private sector and elsewhere is very poor. These conditions include salaries and other remunerations, career development programmes, proper grading systems, pension schemes, security of tenure etc. Where these basic conditions are poor, talking about professionalism and ethics seem a luxury (United Nations, 2000: 6).

Unwillingness to Disclose Misconducts

Most often people are unwilling to report unprofessional conducts for disciplinary actions. Gundu (2011:150) views this in terms of fear of risking personal-cost-ethical-dilemma. There are always cases of victimization and threats to life, whereas, there are no adequate protection measures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goals of public administration require that public servants serve the public interest with discipline and accountability. However, despite the availability of policy and regulatory frameworks relating to public administration professionalism in the Country, unethical behaviors still persist. These are identified in the form of corruption, lack of discipline, sabotages, recruitment of unqualified and incompetent personnel etc. The Country undoubtedly, requires public servants with strong qualities of integrity arising from internalized values and principles. The focus of this paper has been to review these frameworks in view of these large scale misconducts that negate professional practices. Professional misconducts in the Country's public administration owes its root to the complex nature of socio-political influences and the inability of successive regimes to enthrone probity, accountability and transparency.

The fulcrum of public administration professionalism is good governance. This involves the application of the best ways to carry out public administration, the extent of implementing policies and the competency in achieving public interests. Efforts should therefore, be made to sustain democracy and good governance in the Country.

Strong political will and institutional mechanisms are needed to implement the policy and regulatory frameworks on public administration professionalism.

Education and continuous training offer the base for skills and competency. The capacity of the public administration training institutes in the Country such as the Administrative Staff College of Nigeria (ASCON) and Public Service Institute of Nigeria (PSIN) should be enhanced. Training programmes in the institutes have to be harmonized and streamlined in line with specific training needs at the three levels of government. Training enables the public servants to further embrace values of accountability, honesty, compassion, predictability and trustworthiness in service. This paper further proposes for the inclusion of ethics course in the academic curriculum of schools from primary to tertiary level. This will enhance the “catch them young” philosophy which is essential in building a reliant public administration attuned to serving the needs of the Country.

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