



## PUBLIC SECTOR ETHICS AND FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION: LESSONS FROM NIGERIA'S ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Corruption remains a major impediment to governance, as many African states continue to experience systemic corruption that weakens public service delivery, erodes citizen trust, and sustains poverty. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country, offers an important case for understanding the relationship between public sector ethics and the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions. This study examines Nigeria's anti-corruption framework, with particular focus on the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), and the judiciary. The study employs a desk-based qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary data from scholarly literature, government documents, and institutional reports. Guided by Ethical Governance Theory, the analysis assesses how ethical norms influence institutional performance in the fight against corruption, while also identifying persistent challenges such as political interference, selective enforcement, inadequate funding, and weak judicial processes. The findings indicate that Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions have achieved notable successes, including asset recovery and high-profile prosecutions. However, corruption remains pervasive due to entrenched patronage systems, limited institutional independence, and weak enforcement mechanisms. The study argues that ethical governance must extend beyond formal codes of conduct to become deeply embedded in institutional culture, supported by transparency, accountability, and active civic participation. The study concludes by drawing lessons for other African countries, emphasizing that sustainable anti-corruption efforts require strong ethical foundations, resilient institutions, and genuine political will. Nigeria's experience highlights both the challenges and possibilities of advancing ethical governance across the continent.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ethics, Corruption, Public Sector, Anti-Corruption Institutions, Nigeria, Africa.



## INTRODUCTION

Corruption is one of the most persistent governance challenges confronting African states. It manifests in multiple forms, such as embezzlement of public funds, bribery, nepotism, procurement fraud, abuse of office, and weak adherence to the rule of law. In Africa, the African Union (AU) estimates that the continent loses more than \$148 billion annually to corruption, accounting for approximately 25% of GDP (African Union, 2018). Such staggering losses undermine developmental projects, erode the legitimacy of state institutions, and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality.

In Nigeria, corruption has remained a central obstacle to governance and development since independence in 1960. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has consistently ranked Nigeria among the most corrupt countries globally, reflecting entrenched institutional weaknesses. While successive governments have launched anti-corruption campaigns, ranging from the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) of the 1980s to the establishment of the EFCC and ICPC in the early 2000s, corruption continues to permeate public life (Transparency International, 2023).

Public sector ethics offers an essential lens for understanding and combating corruption. 'Ethics' refers to the principles of right conduct guiding public officials in decision-making and service delivery. In the African context, weak institutionalisation of ethical norms contributes to corruption by allowing personal, ethnic, or political loyalties to override public interest. Strengthening ethics in public administration is therefore indispensable to the fight against corruption. Nigeria's experience with anti-corruption institutions provides valuable lessons not only for the country but also for other African nations grappling with similar governance crises.

Despite the establishment of multiple anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), the record of corrupt practices remains deeply entrenched within the public sector. Although these institutions have recorded notable achievements in areas including asset recovery, public awareness, and high-profile prosecutions, their overall impact has been constrained by persistent challenges that demand researchers' attention. Existing literature has largely focused on the legal mandates and operational activities of these agencies, with insufficient empirical attention to the role of public sector ethics and how ethical standards influence institutional effectiveness in combating corruption. Moreover, comparative insights on how Nigeria's experience can inform anti-corruption efforts in other African states remain underexplored. This gap underscores the need for a study that critically examines the relationship between public sector ethics and the performance of anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria. A study of such magnitude would contribute to knowledge by providing context-specific empirical evidence on ethical governance and institutional effectiveness, enriching anti-corruption literature, informing policy reforms, and offering practical lessons for strengthening anti-corruption frameworks across Africa.



## Objectives of the Study

This article seeks to:

1. Examine the achievements of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions (EFCC, ICPC, CCB, and judiciary).
2. Identify persistent challenges facing anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria.
3. Draw lessons for African countries on embedding ethics and strengthening institutional resilience in the fight against corruption.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Explanations

#### Public Sector Ethics

Public sector ethics refers to the set of moral principles and standards that guide the behaviour of individuals and organisations in governmental settings, ensuring actions are aligned with the public interest, accountability, transparency, and integrity. Ethical conduct in the public sector is foundational for good governance, because public officials are entrusted with authority and resources to serve the common good rather than personal interests. When ethical standards are internalised and enforced, they foster trust, enhance the legitimacy of institutions, and deter corrupt practices (Sawyer, 2025). In Nigeria, the ethical environment of the public service has drawn increasing scholarly concern due to pervasive cases of rent-seeking, moral laxity, and disregard for accountability frameworks that are meant to check abuse of office. Studies highlight that without a strong ethical culture, formal anti-corruption measures such as sanctions and laws risk being reactive rather than preventive (Sawyer, 2025). For example, low compliance with codes of conduct and weak enforcement mechanisms contribute to unethical behaviours, including bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement, undermining institutional performance and sustainable development. Research on public perception also suggests that citizens often view work ethics in Nigeria's public sector as inadequate, reflecting systemic ethical challenges that go beyond individual misconduct to institutional norms (Afolayan et al., 2023). Strengthening ethics therefore involves more than punitive measures; it requires embedding integrity into public service values, promoting ethical leadership, elevating civic education, and improving accountability systems (Sawyer, 2025). In sum, public sector ethics is critical for preventing corruption and enhancing governance, and addressing ethical deficits is central to reforming the Nigerian public administration for improved performance and public trust.

#### Anti-Corruption Institutions in Nigeria

Anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria are specialised bodies explicitly established to prevent, investigate, and prosecute corrupt practices within the public and private sectors. These institutions are central pillars of the country's governance architecture, designed to strengthen accountability and uphold the rule of law. Chief among them are the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). The EFCC has primary responsibility for investigating complex



financial crimes, money laundering, and fraud, while the ICPC focuses on corruption prevention, education, and systemic integrity reforms. Both institutions also collaborate with other stakeholders, including the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), judiciary, and civil society, to widen anti-corruption impact (Okolie & Egbon, 2025). Recent evidence shows that the EFCC achieved a notable recovery of nearly \$500 million in assets and over 4,000 convictions in a 12-month period through intensified enforcement efforts, signalling operational milestones in asset recovery and prosecutions (Reuters, 2025). However, persistent challenges continue to dampen institutional effectiveness. Research highlights limitations such as insufficient institutional capacity, political interference, overlapping mandates, and weak coordination, which constrain timely prosecutions and comprehensive systemic reforms (Okolie & Egbon, 2025). Additionally, despite collaboration efforts and technological advancements, anti-corruption agencies face operational hurdles such as digital forensics gaps and cross-border legal complexities that impede evidence gathering and transnational investigations (Aliyu, 2025). Nonetheless, institutions like the ICPC have undertaken strategic reforms, including corruption risk assessments, public awareness campaigns, and strengthening internal controls aimed at fostering a culture of integrity across public institutions (Aliyu, 2025). Collectively, anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria represent a dynamic and evolving governance response to corruption, achieving gains in enforcement and public education yet underscored by structural challenges that limit their full potential.

### **Fight Against Corruption**

The fight against corruption in Nigeria encapsulates the collective legal, institutional, and societal efforts aimed at reducing the incidence and impact of corrupt practices. Corruption, manifesting as bribery, embezzlement, abuse of office, and systemic clientelism, significantly undermines governance, economic development, and public trust. Anti-corruption efforts involve enforcement actions by specialised agencies, legal reforms, public-sector institutional changes, and broader governance initiatives aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. For instance, the EFCC's reported recovery of nearly \$500 million in criminal proceeds and the record number of convictions in a recent year demonstrate measurable enforcement results and capacity for asset recovery (Reuters, 2025). These enforcement successes indicate progress in prosecuting complex financial crimes and disrupting illicit financial flows. However, empirical assessments highlight persistent gaps in the overall impact of anti-corruption efforts, including the limited effectiveness of prosecutions in deterring high-level corruption and the continued low perception of integrity at the national level. Nigeria's ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index remains low, reflecting enduring public scepticism regarding the efficacy of anti-corruption strategies (Muhammed et al., 2025). Researchers note that political interference, weak institutional capacities, and procedural delays in the judiciary undermine comprehensive outcomes, suggesting that enforcement alone is insufficient without deeper systemic reforms (Okolie & Egbon, 2025). Moreover, sections of scholarship emphasise the importance of preventive measures, civic education, and ethical reorientation in both the public sector and civil society to create sustainable anti-corruption outcomes. Strategic adoption of technology in investigations and cross-agency collaborations is increasingly highlighted to enhance evidentiary capacity and enforcement reach (Aliyu, 2025). Therefore, the fight against corruption in Nigeria remains multifaceted, requiring a combination of robust institutions, ethical governance practices, public participation, and legal reforms to achieve meaningful reductions in corruption and strengthen democratic governance.



## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ETHICAL GOVERNANCE THEORY**

This study is anchored on Ethical Governance Theory, which was prominently advanced by Dennis F. Thompson in 1985 in his seminal work *Ethics in Congress* and later expanded in *Political Ethics and Public Office* (1995). Thompson's theory emerged from the field of public ethics and governance, emphasising that good governance is inseparable from ethical conduct and that public institutions must be guided not only by formal rules and laws but also by shared moral values and ethical responsibility (Thompson, 1985; Thompson, 1995).

Ethical governance theory posits that governance systems function effectively when ethical norms such as integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, and responsibility to the public interest are institutionalised within public sector structures and decision-making processes. According to the theory, corruption thrives where governance is reduced to legal compliance without moral commitment, resulting in selective enforcement, abuse of discretion, and erosion of public trust (Thompson, 1995). Thus, ethical governance goes beyond rule-based administration to emphasise moral leadership, ethical culture, and institutional integrity as foundations of effective public administration.

In contemporary governance discourse, scholars have reaffirmed the relevance of ethical governance theory, particularly in developing democracies such as Nigeria, where formal anti-corruption institutions exist but corruption persists (Afolayan et al., 2023; Sawyer, 2025). Recent studies argue that weaknesses in Nigeria's fight against corruption are not merely institutional or legal failures but manifestations of ethical deficits within public leadership and administrative culture (Sawyer, 2025). Ethical governance theory therefore provides a useful lens for explaining why anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC, ICPC, and CCB achieve mixed outcomes despite having strong legal mandates.

Applied to this study, Ethical Governance Theory explains that the effectiveness of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions is largely dependent on the ethical environment in which they operate, including leadership integrity, institutional independence, accountability mechanisms, and moral commitment to public interest. The theory supports the argument that strengthening public sector ethics is central to winning the fight against corruption and that sustainable anti-corruption outcomes require ethical transformation alongside legal and institutional reforms.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, which is appropriate for analysing governance issues, institutional performance, and ethical frameworks. Desk-based research relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, legal documents, policy briefs, media sources and publications from international organisations. The qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of how public sector ethics interacts with institutional performance in Nigeria's anti-corruption framework. The data were analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a complex picture of Nigeria's anti-corruption landscape. While Nigeria has established some of Africa's most prominent anti-corruption institutions, their effectiveness has been shaped by ethical considerations, political interference, and systemic weaknesses.

### Achievements of Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Institutions

The EFCC, ICPC, and CCB have made notable contributions to combating corruption in Nigeria. Table 1 summarises some of their key achievements.

**Table 1: Selected Achievements of Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Institutions**

Institution	Key Achievements	Sources
EFCC	Secured convictions of high-profile politicians, recovered billions of naira in stolen assets, disrupted advance fee fraud syndicates	EFCC Annual Report (2022)
ICPC	Investigated procurement fraud in ministries, curbed examination malpractices, enforced preventive measures in public institutions	ICPC Report (2021)
CCB/CCT	Enforced asset declaration laws, prosecuted some public officials for false declarations	CCB Annual Report (2020)
Judiciary	Handled landmark corruption trials, upheld constitutional provisions on fair hearing and due process	Federal High Court Digest (2021)

The EFCC has shown strong performance in prosecuting high-profile politicians, recovering stolen assets, and disrupting fraud syndicates. These achievements indicate effective enforcement against grand corruption and financial crimes. Studies (Ibrahim & Bello, 2023) support that the EFCC's actions have enhanced deterrence and public awareness, although selective enforcement concerns highlight the need for consistent, impartial operations.

The ICPC has focused on preventive anti-corruption measures, such as addressing procurement fraud and curbing examination malpractices. Its preventive approach aligns with ethical governance principles by targeting corruption at operational and systemic levels. Empirical evidence (Nkwocha & Okoye, 2024) confirms that preventive interventions effectively reduce opportunities for corruption, though their broader impact depends on sustained institutional support and monitoring.

The CCB/CCT has contributed to ethical compliance by enforcing asset declaration laws and prosecuting false declarations. This enhances transparency and accountability, though enforcement capacity remains limited. Adeyemi et al. (2022) support that asset declaration systems improve public sector integrity but require robust monitoring and follow-up to maximise effectiveness.

The judiciary plays a crucial role in ensuring due process and fair trials in corruption cases, underpinning the legitimacy of anti-corruption enforcement. While judicial interventions are critical, procedural delays and backlogs limit timely outcomes. Ogunbiyi and Olatunji (2025)



note that these inefficiencies can affect public perception, though judicial oversight remains essential for institutional credibility and adherence to constitutional standards.

### **Persistent Challenges Facing Anti-Corruption Institutions**

Despite achievements, corruption remains pervasive. Several interrelated challenges undermine Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions:

- I. **Political Interference:** Political interference remains a major obstacle to the effectiveness of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions. Okolie and Egbon (2025) argue that political elites often manipulate agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC to target opponents while shielding allies, which undermines institutional credibility and impartiality. Hoffmann (2025) further emphasises that politicisation and clientelism erode public trust, weaken the normative power of anti-corruption institutions, and reduce citizen confidence in enforcement efforts. Together, these analyses indicate that the manipulation of anti-corruption bodies for political purposes compromises their independence and diminishes the overall effectiveness of Nigeria's fight against corruption.
- II. **Inadequate Resources:** Insufficient financial, technical, and human resources severely constrain the capacity of anti-corruption agencies. Okolie and Egbon (2025) highlight that underfunded institutions struggle with staffing, investigations, and prosecutions, which delays enforcement and weakens deterrent outcomes. Similarly, the American Journal of Sciences and Engineering Research (2025) notes that lack of access to modern investigative tools and analytical infrastructure hampers agencies' ability to pursue sophisticated corruption networks effectively. These analyses collectively demonstrate that resource scarcity directly limits the operational effectiveness of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions.
- III. **Weak Judicial Processes:** Weak judicial processes continue to hinder timely anti-corruption outcomes in Nigeria. According to Okolie and Egbon (2025), procedural delays, legal loopholes, and frequent adjournments dilute the deterrent effect of corruption prosecutions and foster a culture of impunity. Premium Times (2025) adds that judicial inefficiencies, including case backlogs and limited access to justice, further undermine public confidence in anti-corruption initiatives. These findings suggest that, without judicial reforms, even well-resourced and proactive anti-corruption agencies may fail to deliver prompt and credible outcomes.
- IV. **Ethical Deficits:** Ethical weaknesses in Nigeria's public sector undermine anti-corruption efforts. Public servants often exhibit unprofessional behaviours and low accountability, while corruption and nepotism reflect deep-seated ethical dilemmas (Afolayan et al., 2023). These deficits suggest that formal rules alone are insufficient and that strengthening ethical standards is essential to reduce corruption.
- V. **Public Perception:** Public perception significantly affects the legitimacy and effectiveness of anti-corruption agencies. Afrobarometer (2025) reports that many Nigerians perceive anti-corruption institutions as corrupt themselves or serving the elite interests, which discourages citizen cooperation with reporting mechanisms. IJFMR (2025) supports this finding, noting that low public trust in these agencies reduces their perceived legitimacy and effectiveness. Together, these analyses underscore that



building public confidence is crucial for anti-corruption institutions to operate effectively and sustainably.

### Lessons for Nigeria and Africa

Nigeria's experience holds several important lessons for Nigeria and African states confronting similar challenges:

- I. **Institutional Design Alone is Insufficient:** Nigeria's experience demonstrates that simply establishing anti-corruption commissions or legal frameworks is not enough to reduce corruption. Effective institutions require independence, accountability, and strong ethical norms. Bawumia et al. (2021) show that commissions may exist on paper but fail in practice when enforcement is weak or politically constrained, highlighting that structural design must be complemented by value-driven implementation to achieve meaningful anti-corruption outcomes.
- II. **Political Will is the Catalyst:** Sustained political commitment is essential for anti-corruption institutions to function effectively. Heywood and Rose (2021) argue that agencies achieve significant results when political leaders actively support ethical governance through resources, legal protection, and institutional autonomy. Conversely, where political elites prioritise personal or partisan interests, institutions are weakened or reduced to symbolic entities, demonstrating that leadership dedication is critical to translating anti-corruption frameworks into practical enforcement and deterrence.
- III. **Citizen Engagement Strengthens Accountability:** Active citizen participation strengthens transparency and institutional accountability. Gyimah-Boadi (2020) notes that civil society, investigative journalism, and social movements, such as Nigeria's EndSARS protests, amplify demands for integrity, expose misconduct, and pressure government agencies to act responsibly. African states benefit when citizens are empowered to monitor public institutions, as sustained engagement can deter corrupt behaviour, improve responsiveness, and create a culture of public accountability across governance systems.
- IV. **Judicial Independence is Critical:** An independent and efficient judiciary is vital for enforcing anti-corruption laws. Kelsall (2020) emphasises that weak, delayed, or corrupt courts undermine prosecutions, allowing corruption to persist and eroding public confidence in governance. Nigeria's experiences show that even proactive anti-corruption agencies cannot succeed without timely and impartial judicial outcomes. Robust judicial systems are therefore a cornerstone of credible enforcement, deterrence, and legitimacy in the fight against corruption.
- V. **Ethics Must Be** Ethics should be deeply embedded in public service beyond mere codes of conduct. Afolayan et al. (2023) argue that integrating ethics into recruitment, training, performance appraisal, and organisational culture fosters integrity and accountability. Institutionalised ethics guide daily decision-making, reduce tolerance for corruption, and reinforce public sector professionalism. African states that mainstream ethical standards in governance are better positioned to sustain anti-corruption efforts and improve overall public service delivery.



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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate the relationship between public sector ethics and the fight against corruption in Africa, using Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions as a case study. The findings reveal a paradox: Nigeria has established some of the continent's most elaborate anti-corruption institutions (EFCC, ICPC, CCB) and supporting judicial bodies, yet corruption remains systemic and pervasive.

The research shows that while these institutions have secured high-profile convictions, recovered assets, and raised awareness, their effectiveness is undermined by entrenched challenges. Political interference, selective prosecutions, weak judicial processes, inadequate resources, and limited ethical culture continue to hinder sustainable anti-corruption progress.

The Nigerian experience demonstrates that institutions alone cannot eradicate corruption. Instead, ethical values must be embedded within public service culture, reinforced by political will, citizen engagement, and judicial independence. Ethics provides the moral compass without which laws and institutions remain vulnerable to manipulation.

For Africa more broadly, Nigeria's mixed results offer both cautionary and inspirational lessons. They caution against overreliance on institutional proliferation without ethical enforcement and highlight the importance of integrity-driven leadership. At the same time, they demonstrate the potential of reforms when ethics and governance align, offering pathways for replicable lessons across the continent.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following:

1. **Institutionalise Ethics in Public Administration:** Ethics training should be integrated into civil service reforms, with performance evaluation linked to ethical compliance. Codes of conduct must go beyond rhetoric and be enforceable.
2. **Ensure Independence of Anti-Corruption Agencies:** Legal and constitutional amendments should safeguard EFCC, ICPC, and CCB from political interference. Leadership appointments must be transparent and merit-based.
3. **Strengthen Judicial Capacity:** Judicial reforms are needed to fast-track corruption cases, minimise technical delays, and promote judicial accountability. Specialised anti-corruption courts may enhance efficiency.
4. **Increase Resource Allocation:** Adequate funding and staffing should be provided to anti-corruption institutions to enable independent investigations, prosecutions, and monitoring.
5. **Enhance Transparency Mechanisms:** Digital platforms for asset declaration, procurement processes, and budget monitoring should be introduced to minimise discretionary abuse.



6. **Promote Citizen and Media Engagement:** Civil society and media watchdogs should be empowered to monitor government actions, ensuring anti-corruption efforts remain accountable and inclusive.
7. **Strengthen Continental Collaboration:** African states should collaborate under AU anti-corruption frameworks to share best practices, conduct joint investigations, and harmonise preventive measures.
8. **Embed Political Will and Leadership Commitment:** Above all, the fight against corruption requires strong political will. Leadership across Africa must prioritise ethical governance as a central pillar of state legitimacy and sustainable development.

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