

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON NATIONAL INTEREST

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ABSTRACT

Corruption remains a major governance challenge in Nigeria, with persistent effects on public institutions and national development despite ongoing reform efforts. This study examines the impact of institutional corruption on Nigeria's national interest and assesses the role of ethical leadership in addressing these challenges. Guided by Principal-Agent Theory, the study adopts a qualitative narrative review approach, drawing on peer-reviewed literature and policy reports, which are analysed thematically. The findings show that corruption undermines national interest by weakening economic performance, eroding political legitimacy, reducing social cohesion, and compromising national security, particularly through revenue leakages, distorted procurement processes, and weakened rule of law. The study identifies key ethical leadership strategies for mitigating corruption, including impartial enforcement of rules, strengthening the autonomy of anti-corruption institutions, and promoting transparency through digital governance systems. The study concludes that corruption in Nigeria is primarily a governance and leadership problem. Sustainable anti-corruption outcomes depend on institutionalising ethical leadership through stronger judicial integrity, consistent reform implementation, and enhanced civic oversight. Embedding ethical leadership within public institutions is therefore critical to protecting national interests and strengthening democratic governance.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, corruption, national interest, governance, Principal-Agent Theory

Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most persistent governance challenges confronting contemporary states. It undermines institutional integrity, weakens public trust, and constrains sustainable development. In Nigeria, this challenge is particularly pronounced. Systemic corruption has steadily weakened the effectiveness and ethical foundations of public institutions. Despite decades of reform initiatives and the establishment of multiple anti-corruption agencies, corrupt practices remain deeply embedded in bureaucratic and political processes. These practices cut across key sectors, including public administration, security governance, and revenue management (Atakpa & Akpan, 2025; Chatham House, 2025).

This persistence indicates that corruption in Nigeria extends beyond individual misconduct. It reflects a structural problem sustained by institutional weaknesses, leadership deficits, and accountability gaps. As a result, important questions arise regarding the role of leadership in addressing corruption and protecting the national interest (Oji, 2024; Trends in Organised Crime, 2025).

National interest refers to the strategic priorities through which a state pursues economic development, political stability, social cohesion, and national security. Beyond external relations, it also includes internal governance factors such as institutional effectiveness, accountability, and citizen well-being. In this context, sustainable development, equitable service delivery, and adherence to the rule of law are central components of national interest in contemporary states (Oji, 2024; Atakpa & Akpan, 2025). However, corruption undermines these foundations by distorting resource allocation, weakening accountability systems, and eroding institutional legitimacy. In Nigeria, this is reflected in declining investment, mismanagement of public funds, deteriorating infrastructure, and persistent inefficiencies across governance systems. These challenges significantly hinder national development.

Ethical leadership has emerged as a critical framework for addressing institutional corruption. It emphasises integrity, transparency, accountability, and a commitment to public service. This contrasts with transactional or opportunistic leadership approaches that often enable or tolerate corrupt practices. Ethical leadership helps to shape organisational culture, strengthen oversight mechanisms, and reinforce norms of good governance (Okiye, 2025; IJCBSS, 2025). Existing studies show that ethically grounded leadership improves institutional performance and supports the implementation of anti-corruption reforms (Matebese, 2024; Gong & Lau, 2024).

However, despite extensive literature on corruption and governance in Nigeria, important gaps remain. Many studies focus primarily on the causes and effects of corruption or on institutional reforms in isolation. Others examine ethical leadership as a general concept without clearly linking it to national interest outcomes. There is limited integrative analysis that connects institutional corruption, ethical leadership, and national interest within a single conceptual framework. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how ethical leadership can be systematically institutionalised to produce sustainable anti-corruption outcomes across key sectors.

This study addresses this gap by examining how corruption in Nigeria's public institutions undermines national interest across economic, political, social, and security domains. It also analyses the role of ethical leadership in mitigating these effects and explores pathways for institutionalising ethical leadership for long-term impact. Specifically, the study addresses three interrelated questions: (i) in what ways does institutional corruption erode Nigeria's national interest? (ii) Which ethical leadership strategies are most effective in countering corruption within public institutions? and (iii) how can ethical leadership be institutionalised to achieve sustainable anti-corruption outcomes?

Conceptual Clarifications

Corruption

In this study, corruption refers to the abuse of entrusted public authority for private gain, including practices such as bribery, embezzlement, patronage, and nepotism. In Nigeria, corruption operates as a systemic feature of governance rather than isolated misconduct. It is embedded in administrative and political processes, where it distorts decision-making, diverts public resources, and weakens service delivery. This systemic nature makes corruption a key explanatory variable in understanding declining institutional performance and its broader implications for national interest (Izuchukwu & Ekundayo, 2023; Sawyer, 2025).

Public Institutions

Public institutions are the formal structures responsible for policy formulation, implementation, and service delivery, including the civil service, judiciary, security agencies, and regulatory bodies. Their effectiveness depends on professionalism, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law. In the Nigerian context, weak oversight, politicisation, and limited enforcement capacity increase institutional vulnerability to corruption. As a result, public institutions serve as the primary arena where corruption manifests and where its effects on governance outcomes can be observed (Sawyer, 2025; Ezeani, 2023).

National Interest

National interest is understood as the set of strategic objectives that guide a state's pursuit of economic development, political legitimacy, social cohesion, and national security. In this study, it is treated as the key outcome variable affected by corruption. In Nigeria, persistent corruption undermines national interest by weakening state capacity, distorting development priorities, and reducing institutional credibility. These effects constrain sustainable growth and limit the state's ability to meet citizens' needs (Izuchukwu & Ekundayo, 2023; Sawyer, 2025).

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to leadership grounded in integrity, accountability, transparency, and commitment to public service. It involves both principled decision-making and the promotion of ethical conduct within institutions. In Nigeria's public sector, ethical leadership is critical for strengthening oversight, enforcing accountability, and shaping organisational culture. Within this study, ethical leadership functions as a mediating variable that can reduce corrupt practices and improve institutional performance, thereby supporting the protection of national interest (Ezeani, 2023; Tsai & Anderson, 2023).

Theoretical Framework: Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-Agent Theory is adopted in this study because it explains corruption in public institutions as a problem of delegated authority and weak accountability. The theory holds that citizens, as principals, delegate authority to public officials, as agents, to manage public resources and implement policies in the collective interest. Corruption arises when those agents pursue private or political gain instead of public goals, particularly where monitoring is weak, sanctions are ineffective, and information is unevenly distributed (Izuchukwu & Ekundayo, 2023; Rose-Ackerman, 2016). This is highly relevant to Nigeria, where weak oversight, patronage politics, and limited accountability often enable public officials to misuse office across the civil service, judiciary, and security sector (Sawyer, 2025; Ezeani, 2023). The theory, therefore, helps explain the first concern of this study: why corruption persists in Nigeria's public institutions despite the existence of formal control mechanisms.

The theory also provides a direct basis for linking the study variables. In this study, corruption is the governance failure caused by agent deviation, while public institutions are the

arena in which that failure occurs. The consequence is the weakening of national interest, reflected in poor service delivery, low public trust, weakened security, and limited development outcomes. Within this framework, ethical leadership is treated as the corrective mechanism because it can improve transparency, strengthen monitoring, enforce rules, and align official conduct with public expectations (Tsai & Anderson, 2023; Ezeani, 2023). In this way, Principal–Agent Theory directly supports the study’s research questions by explaining the persistence of corruption, its effects on national interest, and the relevance of ethical leadership as a strategy for institutional reform in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative review design complemented by illustrative institutional case analysis to examine the relationship between ethical leadership, corruption, and national interest in Nigeria. The design is appropriate because the study is conceptual and interpretive, drawing on existing scholarly and policy literature rather than primary field data. A structured literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, while policy and institutional materials were obtained from Transparency International, the World Bank, UNODC, OECD, and relevant Nigerian government and public policy portals. The search was guided by combinations of terms such as ethical leadership, corruption in Nigeria, public institutions, governance, accountability, and national interest. Retrieved materials were screened in three stages: first, duplicates and clearly irrelevant records were removed; second, titles, abstracts, and executive summaries were reviewed for topical relevance; and third, full texts were selected based on explicit inclusion criteria. Only sources published in English between 2010 and 2025 and directly addressing corruption, ethical leadership, governance, or public institutional performance were retained. The final review corpus consisted of methodologically credible academic publications and authoritative policy reports.

Thematic Findings and Review of Institutional Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption in Nigeria is a deeply embedded governance challenge shaped by historical and institutional factors. Rather than diminishing through reforms, it has adapted and persisted across political transitions, becoming a systemic feature of public administration (Agbibo, 2021; Lewis, 2023). This section presents the study’s findings by examining how corruption undermines national interest, the role of ethical leadership in addressing it, and the conditions required for sustainable reform.

1 Corruption and the Erosion of National Interest

Institutional corruption weakens Nigeria’s ability to achieve its core national objectives, including economic development, political stability, social cohesion, and national security. These effects are interconnected. Economic losses reduce state capacity, weakened institutions erode public trust, and declining trust contributes to insecurity and instability. As a result, corruption is increasingly viewed not just as a governance issue but as a broader threat to national development (Lewis, 2023; Transparency International, 2024).

Historically, corruption in Nigeria reflects long-standing institutional patterns. Colonial administrative systems prioritised resource extraction over accountability, while post-independence governance and prolonged military rule reinforced centralised authority and weak oversight. Although democratic rule since 1999 introduced formal accountability mechanisms, corrupt practices have persisted in new forms, including procurement fraud, electoral malpractice, and political patronage.

Across sectors, corruption has become normalised within institutional processes. In the civil service, practices such as bribery, patronage-based recruitment, and resource diversion weaken efficiency and service delivery. In the security sector, extortion and abuse of power reduce

public trust and undermine internal security capacity. Similarly, judicial corruption and political interference weaken the rule of law. In procurement systems, opaque processes and discretionary decision-making enable large-scale financial leakages. Together, these patterns illustrate how corruption operates as a routine feature of governance rather than an exception.

The consequences of corruption are most evident in its impact on national interest. Economically, it reduces public revenue through embezzlement, tax evasion, and illicit financial flows, while discouraging investment and contributing to infrastructure failure. Politically, it weakens democratic institutions by enabling selective enforcement of laws, electoral malpractice, and elite impunity, thereby eroding legitimacy. Socially, corruption deepens inequality and limits access to essential services, particularly for vulnerable populations. In the security sector, the diversion of defence resources weakens operational capacity and prolongs insecurity. These combined effects reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which corruption continuously undermines state effectiveness.

Several reinforcing factors drive the persistence of corruption. Weak institutional capacity, including poor enforcement and limited oversight, reduces accountability. Impunity, often reflected in delayed or selective justice, further weakens deterrence. Socioeconomic pressures such as poverty and unemployment increase incentives for rent-seeking behaviour. In addition, entrenched patronage networks normalise corruption as part of everyday governance, making reform difficult without strong leadership intervention.

2 Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption Strategies

Ethical leadership plays a central role in addressing corruption by strengthening accountability and restoring institutional integrity. In contrast to opportunistic leadership, ethical leadership emphasises transparency, fairness, and commitment to public service. These principles are critical for rebuilding trust and improving governance outcomes.

One key strategy is the consistent enforcement of rules and accountability systems. Ethical leaders reduce impunity by applying sanctions impartially and strengthening mechanisms such as audits, reporting systems, and performance monitoring. This helps restore credibility to public institutions and discourages corrupt behaviour.

Another important approach is the protection and strengthening of anti-corruption institutions. Agencies such as the EFCC, ICPC, and CCB are essential to Nigeria's anti-corruption framework but are often weakened by political interference and resource constraints. Ethical leadership enhances their effectiveness by ensuring operational independence, adequate funding, and professional integrity, thereby improving public confidence in enforcement processes. Transparency in policy implementation also plays a critical role. Ethical leaders promote open procurement processes, public financial disclosure, and digital governance systems such as e-procurement and e-payments. These measures reduce opportunities for discretion and corruption while improving efficiency and accountability. However, their success depends on sustained leadership commitment and institutional support.

3 Institutionalising Ethical Leadership for Sustainable Outcomes

While ethical leadership is essential, its long-term impact depends on institutionalisation. Sustainable anti-corruption outcomes require ethical principles to be embedded in organisational systems, legal frameworks, and governance practices, rather than relying on individual leaders.

One key pathway is cultural and value reorientation. In Nigeria, corruption is often socially tolerated due to patronage norms and survival pressures. Ethical leadership can shift these norms by promoting codes of conduct, enforcing discipline, and supporting ethics training. Strengthening whistleblower protection, civil society engagement, and media freedom also enhances accountability by encouraging citizen participation.

Judicial integrity is another critical factor. An effective judiciary ensures that corruption cases are handled fairly and efficiently. However, delays and allegations of judicial misconduct weaken deterrence. Institutional reforms such as financial autonomy, transparent appointments, and specialised anti-corruption courts can strengthen judicial credibility and reinforce the rule of law.

Finally, continuity of reforms is essential. Frequent policy changes and institutional restructuring across political cycles undermine progress. Ethical leadership supports long-term reform by prioritising consistency, protecting key institutions from political interference, and embedding accountability mechanisms within administrative processes.

4 Thematic Synthesis

Overall, the findings show that corruption in Nigeria systematically undermines national interest by weakening economic performance, political legitimacy, social cohesion, and security capacity. Ethical leadership mitigates these effects by strengthening accountability, protecting institutions, and promoting transparency. However, lasting impact depends on institutionalising these practices through cultural change, judicial reform, and sustained policy implementation. Without this, anti-corruption efforts remain fragmented and vulnerable to reversal.

Case Studies: Leadership Interventions and Anti-Corruption Efforts

To complement the conceptual analysis, this section examines selected cases to assess how leadership, institutional design, and political context shape anti-corruption outcomes. Rather than merely describing reforms, the analysis focuses on explaining what worked, what failed, and why. The cases also provide a comparative basis for understanding how ethical leadership influences institutional performance and national interest outcomes across different contexts.

1 Treasury Single Account (TSA): Reform Effectiveness and Implementation Gaps

The Treasury Single Account (TSA) represents a significant attempt to strengthen financial accountability by centralising government revenues and reducing leakages (World Bank, 2021). In its initial phase, the reform recorded notable success. Strong political backing and administrative enforcement limited discretionary control over public funds and improved transparency. This demonstrates how ethical leadership, through commitment to reform and enforcement, can produce measurable governance improvements.

However, the effectiveness of the TSA has been uneven over time. Compliance weakened due to selective exemptions, resistance from vested interests, and inconsistent enforcement across agencies (World Bank, 2023). These limitations reveal a critical weakness: reforms that rely heavily on initial political will, without strong institutional safeguards, tend to lose momentum. In this case, the absence of sustained oversight and enforcement mechanisms allowed old practices to re-emerge. Thus, while the TSA shows that ethical leadership can initiate reform, it also highlights that institutionalisation, not policy introduction, is the key determinant of long-term success. Without embedding reforms into routine administrative systems, gains remain fragile.

2 EFCC: Leadership Credibility and Political Constraints

The EFCC illustrates how leadership orientation directly shapes anti-corruption outcomes. At different periods, the agency has demonstrated both effectiveness and limitations. Where leadership prioritised professionalism, independence, and procedural fairness, enforcement appeared stronger, and public confidence increased. This suggests that ethical leadership enhances both legitimacy and deterrence.

However, the EFCC has also faced persistent challenges, particularly allegations of selective prosecution and political interference (UNODC, 2023; TI, 2024). These issues weaken credibility and reduce the deterrent effect of anti-corruption efforts. From a principal-agent perspective, political capture undermines monitoring and enforcement, allowing corruption to

persist despite formal institutional frameworks. The key insight from this case is that anti-corruption agencies are only as effective as the political and institutional conditions that support them. Ethical leadership improves performance, but without structural independence and protection from political influence, institutional effectiveness remains inconsistent.

3 Defence Procurement: Corruption as a National Security Threat

The defence procurement case demonstrates the most direct link between corruption and national interest. The diversion of funds intended for counter-insurgency operations in Nigeria's North-East weakened military capacity and contributed to prolonged insecurity (TI Defence & Security, 2023). This illustrates how corruption extends beyond administrative inefficiency to become a strategic threat to state survival.

While investigations and policy responses were initiated, their impact has been limited by slow judicial processes and low conviction rates. This weak enforcement reduces deterrence and reinforces perceptions of impunity. The failure here is not only in corruption itself but in the inability of institutions to respond effectively to it. This case highlights a critical insight: in high-risk sectors such as security, weak accountability has amplified consequences. Unlike financial or administrative sectors, failures in defence governance directly translate into loss of lives, territorial instability, and reduced state legitimacy. Ethical leadership in such contexts must therefore be accompanied by robust oversight and swift enforcement mechanisms.

4 Singapore: Success, Context, and Limitations

Singapore is widely regarded as a model of effective anti-corruption governance, driven by strong political will, institutional integrity, and consistent enforcement. The empowerment of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), merit-based public service, and strict accountability measures contributed to sustained reductions in corruption (Quah, 2021). A key strength of Singapore's approach lies in its consistency. Anti-corruption laws are applied uniformly, and enforcement is largely insulated from political interference. In addition, competitive remuneration and strict asset declaration systems reduce incentives for corrupt behaviour. These factors demonstrate how ethical leadership, when institutionalised, can produce long-term governance outcomes.

However, this model also has important limitations that are often overlooked. Singapore's success is partly shaped by its unique context, including its small size, strong state capacity, and highly centralised governance structure. These conditions make enforcement easier and reduce the complexity of oversight compared to larger and more diverse countries like Nigeria.

Furthermore, critics argue that Singapore's model relies heavily on strong state control, which may limit political pluralism and civic contestation. This raises questions about the transferability of its approach to democratic contexts where political competition and institutional fragmentation are more pronounced. Therefore, while Singapore provides valuable lessons, its model cannot be directly replicated without considering structural and political differences.

5 Comparative Analysis and Synthesis

A comparison of the cases reveals several important patterns supported by existing scholarship. First, ethical leadership is a necessary but insufficient condition for sustainable anti-corruption success. Evidence from Nigeria, particularly in the TSA and EFCC cases, shows that while leadership commitment can initiate reforms, outcomes are often undermined by weak institutionalisation and political interference. This aligns with findings by Susan Rose-Ackerman and Bonnie J. Palifka (2023), who argue that anti-corruption efforts fail where enforcement mechanisms are inconsistent and institutions lack autonomy. Similarly, Transparency International (2024) reports that selective enforcement and political capture significantly weaken anti-corruption outcomes in many developing countries, including Nigeria.

Second, institutional context plays a decisive role in shaping outcomes. In weak or politically constrained systems, reforms tend to be inconsistent and reversible. In contrast, stronger institutional environments, characterised by bureaucratic capacity, policy continuity, and insulation from political interference, support more durable outcomes. This is consistent with the work of Bo Rothstein and colleagues (Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013; 2023), who demonstrate that corruption persists in systems where it becomes a collective equilibrium reinforced by weak institutions. Reports by the World Bank (2023) and OECD (2022) further emphasise that institutional strength, rather than isolated reforms, is critical for sustaining anti-corruption gains.

Third, the consequences of corruption vary significantly across sectors, with some effects posing immediate threats to national stability. While financial mismanagement reduces development capacity, corruption in defence and security sectors has more direct and severe implications. Evidence from Transparency International Defence and Security (2023) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) shows that corruption in defence procurement weakens operational effectiveness, prolongs conflict, and undermines state legitimacy. This supports the argument that corruption should be understood not only as a governance failure but also as a strategic threat to national interest.

Overall, the comparative evidence indicates that sustainable anti-corruption outcomes require more than leadership commitment alone. Effective reform depends on the interaction between ethical leadership, strong institutions, and context-specific adaptation. As highlighted by Transparency International (2024) and World Bank (2023), reforms that do not address these structural conditions are unlikely to produce lasting impact.

Constraints to Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Anti-Corruption in Nigeria

Despite the existence of anti-corruption laws, institutions, and reform initiatives, ethical leadership and sustainable anti-corruption outcomes in Nigeria remain constrained by interconnected structural and political factors. Rather than operating independently, these constraints reinforce one another, creating a system in which reform efforts are frequently neutralised. Political interference weakens enforcement capacity, weak institutions enable patronage networks, and policy inconsistency sustains public cynicism toward reform. Consequently, ethical leadership becomes not only difficult to practice but also risky to sustain within existing governance arrangements (Persson, Rothstein, & Teorell, 2023; Lewis, 2023).

1 Political Interference

Political interference remains a central obstacle to credible anti-corruption enforcement. Executive and partisan influence over investigative agencies and judicial processes often undermines institutional autonomy. This does not merely affect individual cases; it reshapes incentives across the governance system. When prosecutions appear selective or politically motivated, public trust declines and anti-corruption institutions lose legitimacy (TI, 2024; UNODC, 2023).

For ethical leaders, this environment creates a strategic dilemma. Upholding integrity may result in political isolation, while compliance with partisan expectations may secure institutional survival. For example, investigations involving politically connected actors are frequently delayed or deprioritised, signalling that accountability depends on political alignment rather than legal standards. Such signals reinforce impunity and discourage reform-oriented leadership (Lewis, 2023).

2 Weak Implementation Capacity

Institutional weakness further limits anti-corruption effectiveness. Nigeria's enforcement framework faces persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, limited investigative

technology, slow judicial procedures, and overlapping mandates among agencies (World Bank, 2023). These weaknesses interact directly with political interference: institutions lacking operational autonomy are more vulnerable to external pressure.

Delayed trials and low conviction rates reduce deterrence. When sanctions are uncertain, corruption becomes a rational adaptation rather than an exceptional behaviour. Ethical leadership, therefore, carries higher personal and professional costs, while corrupt practices become embedded in routine administrative processes (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2023). The problem is not simply weak capacity but a feedback loop in which inefficiency legitimises further interference.

3 Patronage Networks and Collective-Action Dynamics

Entrenched patronage networks sustain corruption by aligning political, bureaucratic, and economic interests around informal exchange systems. These networks distribute resources, protection, and opportunities through loyalty rather than merit, making corruption collectively maintained rather than individually driven (Agbibo, 2021).

This dynamic produces a collective-action problem. Individual ethical behaviour yields little benefit when others continue operating within patronage systems. Reform-minded officials may face resistance, marginalisation, or reassignment, discouraging sustained ethical leadership. Importantly, patronage networks thrive where institutional enforcement is weak and politically influenced, illustrating how structural constraints reinforce each other (Persson et al., 2023).

4 Policy Discontinuity across Governments

Frequent policy discontinuity across administrations undermines long-term reform sustainability. Anti-corruption initiatives are often redesigned, renamed, or abandoned following political transitions, preventing institutional learning and weakening reform momentum (OECD, 2022).

This inconsistency sends a powerful signal to public officials: integrity reforms may be temporary political projects rather than enduring governance commitments. As a result, bureaucratic actors may delay compliance, anticipating future reversals. Ethical leadership, which depends on stable institutional expectations, becomes difficult to institutionalise when policies change with electoral cycles (UNDP, 2023).

5 Cultural Tolerance and Normalisation

Social attitudes also shape the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms. In contexts marked by economic insecurity and weak state service delivery, corrupt practices may be rationalised as survival strategies or obligations within patron–client relationships (Agbibo, 2021). This normalisation blurs distinctions between reciprocity and misconduct. However, cultural tolerance should not be viewed in isolation from institutional failure. Persistent impunity and inconsistent enforcement reinforce public perceptions that corruption is unavoidable. Citizens may therefore prioritise access to networks over adherence to formal rules. Without visible and consistent accountability, ethical reformers struggle to mobilise societal support (UNDP, 2023; TI, 2024).

Recommendations

Based on these findings, five practical recommendations are proposed.

- i. Improve transparency in procurement processes by strengthening open, trackable, and accountable procurement practices across public institutions. This will reduce excessive discretion, limit manipulation in contract awards, and make the use of public funds more visible.

- ii. Strengthen accountability for senior public officials through more effective monitoring of asset declaration, official conduct, and use of public office. This will help reduce abuse of power and reinforce ethical responsibility in leadership.
- iii. Promote integrity-based leadership assessment by evaluating public sector leaders not only on administrative performance but also on their commitment to transparency, accountability, and compliance with rules. This will make ethical leadership a practical institutional standard.
- iv. Improve the speed and credibility of corruption case handling through more efficient judicial and enforcement processes. Faster and more reliable resolution of corruption cases will strengthen deterrence and restore public trust in anti-corruption efforts.
- v. Strengthen ethics education and whistleblower protection across public institutions. Regular ethics training and stronger safeguards for whistleblowers will encourage responsible conduct, improve internal reporting, and support a more accountable public service culture.

Conclusion

This study examines corruption in Nigeria as a governance challenge shaped by the interaction of institutional weaknesses, political dynamics, and leadership practices, rather than as a purely legal problem. Its key contribution lies in demonstrating that ethical leadership is not merely a normative ideal but a critical factor that directly influences enforcement credibility, organisational culture, and public trust, thereby determining the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts. By linking ethical leadership to governance outcomes, the study provides a clearer explanation for why many anti-corruption reforms in Nigeria fail to achieve sustainable results despite the presence of formal frameworks. It further shows that meaningful progress depends on aligning institutional practices and accountability mechanisms with leadership behaviour, rather than relying solely on new policies or regulatory measures. This contribution is significant because it reframes anti-corruption reform as a leadership-driven process, highlighting that long-term improvements in national interest, development, and institutional performance depend on embedding ethical conduct at the core of governance systems.

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