

# Anti-Corruption Initiatives and Bureaucratic Collaboration: A Critical Reappraisal of Corruption Dynamics in Nigeria

By

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## Abstract

*Despite decades of anti-corruption campaigns, Nigeria continues to grapple with deeply rooted corruption, particularly within its public sector. While attention often centers on political elites, this study shifts focus to a less examined but equally powerful force, civil servants working together in what can be termed “collaborative bureaucracy.” This research critically explores how networks of bureaucrats, bound by mutual protection and shared interests, subtly but effectively undermine anti-corruption initiatives. Through qualitative analysis and documentary review, the study uncovers how these internal alliances help sustain corruption, shield misconduct, and frustrate reform efforts from within. The study found that rather than isolate bad actors, it is the systemic cooperation among bureaucrats that creates a resilient environment for corruption to thrive. The findings argue*

*for a rethinking of Nigeria’s anti-corruption strategy, one that not only targets high-profile individuals but also addresses the institutional cultures and collaborative behaviors embedded in everyday bureaucracy. By highlighting these overlooked dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of public sector corruption and offers insights for more grounded and effective policy reforms.*

**Keywords:** Corruption, Bureaucracy, Civil Servants, Anti-Corruption, Governance, Institutional Reform

## Introduction

Corruption in Nigeria has been a long-standing issue, one that defies simple explanations or easy solutions. Over the years, every new administration has arrived with promises to root it out. From high-profile arrests to the establishment of watchdog agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission

(EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the fight against corruption has become a regular feature of national governance. Yet, despite decades of effort and millions of dollars spent, the problem remains deeply entrenched. Nigeria continues to perform poorly on global corruption indices and, perhaps more tellingly, many Nigerians have grown increasingly skeptical about whether real change is even possible (Transparency International, 2023).

Much of the existing conversation focuses on politicians and senior officials, the so-called “big fish” (Marquette & Peiffer, 2023, p.85). These individuals dominate headlines and anti-corruption rhetoric, reinforcing the idea that corruption is primarily a top-level phenomenon. But this framing leaves out a vital part of the story. Behind the scenes, away from the spotlight, thousands of civil servants quietly shape how the Nigerian state functions or fails to (Oludotun, 2025, para. 3). In fact, it’s often within the everyday workings of government ministries and agencies that corruption takes its most resilient form. Civil servants, though not always in the public eye, hold the keys to policy implementation, procurement, budgeting, and oversight. Their decisions, interactions, and silences matter (Brodkin, 2021).

This research takes a closer look at this

overlooked part of the system. It asks a simple but powerful question: what if corruption in Nigeria’s public sector isn’t just the work of a few bad actors, but the result of collective behavior among bureaucrats? What if, instead of isolated cases of wrongdoing, we are dealing with something more organized, more cooperative, and more deeply woven into the fabric of public service? To explore this, the study introduces the idea of collaborative bureaucracy, a term used to describe informal networks of civil servants who work together to protect one another, share benefits, and quietly resist reform. These bureaucrats are not necessarily high-ranking or politically powerful, but they are connected by mutual interests and a shared understanding of how to “work the system.” Through this informal collaboration, they can influence decisions, block investigations, delay processes, and ensure that even well-intentioned policies fail to take root (Zakari & Button, 2022, p.130).

While there is a growing body of literature exploring the relationship between bureaucracy and corruption (Khan, 2018; Ayee, 2019), most of it still treats civil servants as either victims of elite manipulation or as individually corrupt. What’s missing is a recognition that bureaucrats often operate in groups, bound together by norms of solidarity, silence, and strategic cooperation. These alliances can be powerful, they help

bureaucrats avoid detection, outlast reforms, and maintain control over critical administrative processes (Oni et al., 2022, p.41). In other words, they could help corruption survive, even when the formal rules and laws say otherwise. This study interrogates the role of the bureaucrats in driving corruption and inhibiting development. Understanding corruption in this way shifts how we think about solutions. It suggests that laws and enforcement mechanisms, while important, are not enough on their own. If corruption is sustained by group behavior and institutional culture, then anti-corruption strategies must also target those dimensions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Corruption in Nigeria has proven remarkably resistant to decades of reform. While successive governments have launched high-profile campaigns, established anti-corruption agencies, and prosecuted elite offenders, the problem remains pervasive and deeply rooted (Transparency International, 2023). Most anti-corruption strategies have focused on political figures and headline-grabbing scandals, overlooking the more subtle but powerful ways corruption persists within the day-to-day operations of the civil service. At the heart of this issue is the role of bureaucrats, not as passive implementers of elite directives, but as active collaborators in networks that

sustain corruption from within. These networks, formed through informal relationships, mutual protection, and shared incentives, enable civil servants to manipulate processes, resist oversight, and frustrate reform. This phenomenon, what this study refers to as collaborative bureaucracy, operates quietly, behind desks and files, but has a profound impact on the success or failure of anti-corruption efforts. It reveals how corruption can thrive not just in law-breaking, but in ordinary administrative practices shaped by institutional norms and group behavior.

The failure to recognize and confront this collaborative dynamic leaves a critical blind spot in Nigeria's reform agenda. Without addressing how everyday bureaucratic actors sustain corrupt systems through cooperation and complicity, anti-corruption efforts are likely to remain superficial and unsustainable (Marquette & Peiffer, 2018). This study, therefore, seeks to explore how these internal (bureaucratic) alliances function, why they endure, the role they play in driving corruption and how a deeper understanding of them might lead to more effective and context-sensitive reforms.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptual Review of Corruption**

Corruption is not a new story in Nigeria; it's a deeply rooted issue that affects almost every part of the public sector. From inflated contracts to routine bribery and administrative bottlenecks, the effects of corruption are visible in broken infrastructure, inefficient services, and a widespread loss of public trust (Hope, 2017; Uzochukwu, 2020). Over the years, researchers and policy makers have focused much of their attention on political elites, such as the presidents, ministers, governors, who are often portrayed as the key drivers of this dysfunction. While these figures certainly hold power, a growing body of research suggests that focusing solely on the top may leave us blind to the real engine of everyday corruption.

Nigeria's civil service is often seen as the invisible machinery of government, responsible for the implementation of public policy. Yet, behind the scenes, bureaucrats, from junior clerks to senior directors, often work within informal networks that seem to help corruption thrive. These are not necessarily secret societies, but rather everyday relationships based on mutual protection, informal rewards, and unspoken codes of silence (Khan, 2018; Olivier de Sardan, 1999). Studies by Blundo and Le Meur (2009), for example, reveal that in many African countries, civil servants

don't always see corrupt behaviour as wrong or deviant; it is sometimes viewed as a practical, even necessary, way of surviving within a poorly functioning system. Low pay, limited accountability, and political interference often reinforce this logic.

One concept that helps explain this reality is "collaborative bureaucracy"; a situation where civil servants protect one another, bend rules collectively, and frustrate reform efforts from within. This kind of collaboration isn't always about greed; it can also be about trust, loyalty, fear of punishment, or simply maintaining one's position in a fragile work environment. Scholars like Khan (2010) and Marquette & Peiffer (2018) argue that corruption is often a rational response to the realities of broken institutions. When rules don't work or are applied unevenly, people rely on relationships instead. In this way, networks of civil servants can become powerful defenders of the status quo, subtly resisting change, manipulating policy implementation, and slowing down efforts at transparency or reform. Efforts to fight corruption in Nigeria, such as creating agencies like the EFCC and ICPC, have made some gains, but they rarely go deep enough to address the everyday behaviors that sustain corrupt systems (Agbibo, 2012; Nwokorie, 2020). Many reforms assume that passing new laws or punishing a few

offenders is enough. But research shows that without shifting the culture within institutions and changing the incentives that guide civil servants, reforms are often symbolic and short-lived (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Andrews, 2013). Civil servants may smile at training workshops and recite new codes of conduct, but once back at their desks, the same old habits persist. Part of the problem is that we still don't know enough about how these internal bureaucratic alliances actually work. How do civil servants signal trust? How are these informal deals struck? What makes someone resist or join in? These are difficult questions, and the answers aren't always clear from the outside. Scholars like Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue that informal institutions, such as personal networks or unwritten rules can be just as powerful as formal laws. In fact, in places like Nigeria, informal practices often override official policies, shaping who gets access, who gets punished, and how rules are interpreted.

### **Anticorruption Crusades in Nigeria**

Nigeria's battle against corruption has been long, complex, and deeply political. Over the years, nearly every government; military and civilian has claimed a desire to tackle the problem. Yet, despite the rhetoric and occasional reforms, corruption remains deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday governance. For many Nigerians, it's more than just a

governance issue; it's a lived reality that affects their access to public services, justice, and opportunity (Uzochukwu, 2020). Early anti-corruption efforts began during the military era. General Murtala Muhammed's short-lived administration in 1975 attempted a radical shake-up of the civil service, dismissing over 10,000 officials in an effort to restore discipline and transparency (Ogundiya, 2009). Though bold, his reforms were not institutionalized and lost momentum after his assassination. Likewise, General Muhammadu Buhari's military regime in the 1980s started the War Against Indiscipline, aimed at promoting moral behavior and combating corruption by humiliating those found guilty and through authoritarian means of enforcement. Others complained that it did not have systemic depth and only touched the surface level (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011).

The restoration of democratic governance in 1999 opened a new chapter. President Olusegun Obasanjo, determined to restore Nigeria's image, set up the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003 and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2000 at the beginning of his presidency. These agencies were designed to investigate and prosecute corruption and deter offenders. Whilst the EFCC initially gained public trust

through high-profile arrests, accusations of selective prosecution and government interference emerged shortly thereafter (Agbibo, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2011). The presidency of President Goodluck Jonathan (2010 – 2015) vowed for transparency through the Transformation Agenda and launched e-governance initiatives and efforts at simplifying procurement processes in the government. However, his presidency was marred by a series of high-profile scandals, including the fuel subsidy fraud in which billions of naira were diverted through ghost fuel imports (BudgIT, 2012). The scandal disclosed the extent to which corruption has pervasively become not just entrenched but institutionalized, and there exists a deep complicity between the civil servants and private actors.

President Muhammadu Buhari, who has a frugal image, ran on an anti-corruption platform in 2015. His government established the Treasury Single Account (TSA), which consolidated government revenues into a single account in an effort to eliminate leakages. The reform made government finances more transparent and ghost accounts lower (PWC, 2016). Buhari also encouraged whistleblowing programs, through which billions of looted funds were recovered. Critics contend nevertheless that enforcement remained uneven and the same bureaucratic resistance and internal

sabotage culture remained unchanged (Transparency International, 2022). More than a decade after the establishment of anti-corruption agencies and numerous reform initiatives, Nigeria's performance on global corruption scores remains poor. In the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report published by Transparency International, Nigeria ranks 140th out of 180 countries at 26 out of a possible 100. Being a slight upgrade from a ranking of 145th in 2023 at 25, this low rating indicates an underlying issue; reforms in the law and institutions usually fail to tackle the longer-standing, informal networks perpetrating corruption from the inside.

### **Bureaucracy in Nigeria: A Human-Faced Reality**

For most Nigerians, dealing with bureaucracy is not an abstract term; it's a part of everyday life. Whether it's applying for a passport, processing university admissions, registering a business, or accessing pensions, citizens must contend with Nigeria's sprawling government bureaucracy. Ideally, the bureaucracy would be a stable professional organization providing services in a proficient manner. In reality, it's perceived as slow-moving, complex, and sometimes infuriatingly opaque. Hidden behind this perception, however, is a more complex narrative of history and politics as well as a will to survive. The Nigerian civil service, bequeathed

from the British colonial government, was initially intended for exerting control and not for providing services (Suberu, 2001). Following independence in 1960, the bureaucracy expanded rapidly as the newly independent state accessed the trappings of sovereignty through enhanced bureaucracy (Adamolekun, 2002). It expanded without the type of profound reforms necessary to enhance accountability, equity, and responsiveness (Adamolekun, 2002). Gradually, politicians started utilising the jobs in the government as rewards for fidelity and converted what ought to be a neutral civil service into a battlefield for influence and patronage.

This culture of political interference has remained stubbornly persistent. Adebayo (2004) notes that promotions and transfers within the Nigerian bureaucracy are often determined not by merit or performance, but by who one knows or what region they're from. This undermines morale and effectiveness. It also breeds inefficiency, where public officials are more focused on survival within the system than delivering results for citizens. Civil servants often face underfunded offices, outdated systems, and immense political pressure, all of which create fertile ground for informal practices and corruption (Olaopa, 2008). For example, a 2020 Transparency International survey found that one in four Nigerians reported paying a

bribe to access public services, most frequently to the police, health workers, and licensing officers (Transparency International, 2020). These aren't just isolated bad apples. Rather, such exchanges often reflect a system where official procedures are so convoluted or under-resourced that bribes become an unofficial "fee" to get things done. Some bureaucrats even see them as necessary to supplement low wages or fund basic office supplies (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2006).

But the issue goes deeper than corruption. Researchers like Khan (2018) and Marquette & Peiffer (2018) describe what happens when bureaucrats form informal networks, alliances of mutual protection, favors, and silence. These networks help some individuals survive and even thrive within a dysfunctional system, but they also block reforms and protect bad practices. When a whistleblower tries to expose wrongdoing, they may be ostracised or punished, while the system closes ranks to defend its own. Still, it's important to remember that many civil servants are doing honest, difficult work in challenging conditions. There are countless stories often untold, of teachers who show up every day in under-resourced schools, or immigration officers who turn down bribes despite the pressure. The problem is not a lack of good people, but a system that too

often punishes integrity and rewards complicity (Hope, 2017).

Reforming Nigeria's bureaucracy, therefore, is not just about introducing new rules or digitising processes though these are important. It's about changing the underlying culture and incentives that shape how civil servants think and behave. This includes fair recruitment, timely promotions, protection for whistleblowers, and leadership that models ethical conduct. Without these, even the most well-designed reforms may be undermined by the invisible networks that operate behind the scenes. In a country where public trust in institutions is low, making the bureaucracy more human, transparent, and accountable is not just a technical challenge, it's a moral and political imperative. After all, for most Nigerians, the true face of government is not the president or the governor, it's the clerk at the counter.

## **Theoretical Framework**

When trying to understand why corruption remains deeply entrenched in Nigeria's public sector despite countless anti-corruption campaigns, it's germane to look beyond surface-level blame games. It's not just about greedy individuals or weak laws. The true narrative tends to be found beneath the surface in the ways systems function: how the rules are flexed, the coalitions formed, and institutions adapt in order

to advance specific interests. In order to explain this, the research draws on two essential theories: Institutional Theory and the Political Settlements Framework. These theories provide insight not only into the "what" of bureaucratic corruption but also the "why" and "how" of its perpetuation.

The Institutional Theory, whether through Douglas North (1990) or W. Richard Scott (2001), holds the belief that institutions encompass not only the policy and written laws found in government texts, but also the unwritten rules individuals obey in everyday practice. Formal institutions in Nigeria such as anti-corruption agencies, codes of ethics, and civil service regulations do exist. But as many Nigerians know all too well, these are often overshadowed by informal norms such as loyalty to colleagues, ethnic ties, or unspoken expectations to "play along" with the system. These informal practices are what North (1990) called the "rules of the game" and in the Nigerian bureaucracy, those rules often reward silence, collaboration, and mutual protection rather than transparency. Scott (2001) expands on this by showing that institutions shape how people interpret their roles. For instance, a government official might view covering up for a colleague who has abused funds as not corruption at all, but as a matter of loyalty or even self-interest. That's why even good-intentioned reforms can fail. The

laws might be changed, but the habits and the culture behind closed doors haven't changed a whit. And so those who desire to do good become the odd ones out or punished when they become whistleblowers in a system which rewards those who simply go along quietly.

This is where Mushtaq Khan's Political Settlements Framework sheds some more light on things. Khan (2010, 2018) maintains that institutions do not fail because they're badly designed but rather because those in a position of power make their living out of the way things are working. Essentially, a political settlement refers to the implicit consensus between elites on how resources and power should be allocated. In Nigeria, civil servants are often part of these elite networks. They don't just serve the public; they also help maintain the status quo. Promotions, postings, and access to lucrative government contracts often depend on who you know, not how well you perform. Bureaucrats who resist these informal networks can be sidelined, while those who cooperate are rewarded. These political settlements create what this study calls "collaborative bureaucracy." Rather than acting alone, bureaucrats form informal alliances that make it difficult for anti-corruption measures to stick. This is not necessarily because everyone is corrupt, but because the system itself has evolved to protect those who play by its unwritten rules. As Khan (2018) points out, corruption in

such environments is not accidental, it's part of how the system works, especially when formal institutions are shaped by underlying political compromises.

By combining Institutional Theory and the Political Settlements Framework, this study views bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria not as a string of isolated incidents, but as a deeply embedded system shaped by norms, incentives, and power dynamics. These theories help us understand why civil servants often act collectively to shield themselves and their colleagues, and why anti-corruption efforts that ignore these dynamics tend to be short-lived. Most importantly, this framework reinforces the need to rethink how we fight corruption. It's not enough to create new agencies or pass tougher laws. Real change must come from disrupting the incentives that reward complicity, building a public service culture that values integrity, and ensuring that reforms are politically feasible, not just legally sound.

## **Empirical Review**

In recent years, the relationship between anti-corruption initiatives and bureaucratic collaboration in Nigeria has garnered increasing scholarly attention. Empirical studies have critically examined how informal networks among bureaucrats shape the outcomes of formal anti-corruption interventions,

revealing complex dynamics that often undermine institutional integrity and policy effectiveness.

Awopeju (2023) offers a detailed empirical assessment of the tensions between anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria, particularly focusing on the Nigeria Police Force, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). Drawing on interviews with key informants, the study finds that overlapping mandates, institutional rivalry, and a lack of synergy among these agencies not only duplicate efforts but also weaken the overall anti-corruption framework. This fragmentation fosters an environment where bureaucrats and law enforcement personnel can operate with considerable discretion and limited oversight, which diminishes the credibility and effectiveness of institutional anti-corruption efforts.

Similarly, Olugboyega, Binga, Oseghale, and Aigbavboa (2023) conducted a regression-based empirical study to explore the influence of anti-corruption systems logic—such as information access, incentives, and reputation mechanisms—on corruption manifestations in Nigeria’s public project planning and implementation. Their findings reveal that while enhanced access to information significantly

reduces instances of bribery and mismanagement, systems that rely solely on reputational concerns or incentives fail when not supported by coherent, context-sensitive reform strategies. This suggests that even well-intentioned policies falter without addressing the deeper bureaucratic norms and informal practices embedded within Nigeria’s governance architecture.

The issue of technology-driven reforms has also received attention. The introduction of platforms like the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), Treasury Single Account (TSA), and Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) were intended to automate and streamline government operations, thereby curbing bureaucratic corruption. However, evidence from the Evidence to Advance Reform report (2022) indicates that while these platforms have achieved notable successes, particularly in reducing ghost workers and enhancing budget transparency, they continue to face significant resistance from within the civil service. The reluctance of bureaucrats to relinquish manual control over administrative processes undermines the transformative potential of digital reforms and reinforces the persistence of informal collaboration among staff who benefit from systemic inefficiencies.

Further, Okolie and Egbon (2025) provide insight into how Nigeria's bureaucratic institutions interact with anti-corruption agencies within a broader political context. Their study, grounded in institutional theory, shows that anti-corruption achievements are often symbolic and episodic due to political interference, inadequate oversight, and the limited autonomy of regulatory institutions. Through case analyses and institutional interviews, they argue that bureaucrats, although not necessarily high-ranking, exercise considerable influence through informal alliances that enable them to delay investigations, frustrate audits, and dilute the implementation of reforms.

Complementary findings are presented by Iloh, Nwogbaga, and Iwuchukwu (2025), who surveyed regulatory agencies in Enugu State to assess how bureaucratic culture affects ethical conduct and governance outcomes. The study reveals that low remuneration, patronage-based appointments, and a lack of professional standards significantly impair the operational efficiency of these agencies. Bureaucrats often resort to rent-seeking behaviour, facilitated by informal coalitions that protect one another and resist accountability measures. This aligns with the broader literature on institutionalised corruption, where bureaucratic inertia and internal

complicity play central roles in sabotaging reform agendas.

The complexity of Nigeria's corruption dynamics is further highlighted in a study by Imoke and Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2024), which explores anti-corruption policy implementation during the Buhari administration (2015–2023). Despite the administration's strong rhetoric and high-profile prosecutions, the authors argue that entrenched prebendal norms, clientelism, and selective enforcement have eroded public trust in the sincerity of reforms. Their analysis points to a recurring pattern where anti-corruption measures are inconsistently applied, often targeting political opponents while leaving embedded bureaucratic actors untouched. This selective enforcement not only delegitimizes anti-corruption agencies but also emboldens lower-tier bureaucrats who understand how to “work the system” to their advantage.

Daniel (2025), in a case study of bureaucratic corruption in Edo State, echoes these concerns. He observes that many corrupt practices are difficult to detect due to entrenched neo-patrimonial structures and the proliferation of ghost workers. His study underscores the importance of engaging broader stakeholders—including civil society, the media, and whistleblowers—in the fight against corruption. According to Daniel, a multi-pronged, inclusive

approach is necessary to expose hidden networks of bureaucratic complicity and hold public officials accountable.

Finally, while the EFCC reports impressive figures—over \$500 million recovered and more than 4,000 convictions in 2024 alone (Reuters, 2025)—Nigeria continues to perform poorly on the global Corruption Perception Index, ranking 140th out of 180 countries. This paradox illustrates a fundamental challenge: enforcement outcomes, while necessary, are insufficient without sustained institutional reform and a deep transformation of bureaucratic culture. Taken together, these empirical studies offer a nuanced understanding of the interplay between anti-corruption efforts and bureaucratic collaboration in Nigeria. They suggest that while formal institutions may appear active and reform-oriented, the informal networks that permeate the civil service often serve as powerful barriers to meaningful change. A critical reappraisal of anti-corruption strategies must, therefore, consider the micro-level behaviours, social norms, and institutional logics that shape the daily practices of public officials.

## Research Methodology

This study embraces a qualitative research approach, grounded in the belief that to truly understand how bureaucratic collaboration undermines

anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria's public sector, we must go beyond surface-level statistics and listen closely to the lived experiences of those inside the system. Corruption, particularly in bureaucratic institutions, often hides in plain sight, operating through silent alliances, unspoken rules, and routine practices that evade formal scrutiny. Capturing these hidden dynamics calls for a method that values depth, context, and meaning over numbers and generalisations. To achieve this, a qualitative case study design was adopted. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the institutional logic and human behaviours behind bureaucratic resistance to anti-corruption reforms. The study focused on selected public institutions known for their central role in governance and service delivery, offering a practical window into the everyday workings of Nigeria's civil service.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 50 participants purposefully selected for their insider knowledge and diverse perspectives. The group included current and former civil servants, anti-corruption officers, policy analysts, and members of oversight bodies. Many of these individuals had direct experience with how anti-corruption policies are initiated, distorted, or quietly sabotaged within bureaucratic processes. Purposive sampling ensured that participants were

well-positioned to provide detailed insights, while snowball sampling enabled the study to reach participants who might otherwise have remained inaccessible due to the sensitivity of the subject. In addition to interviews, the study analysed relevant documents—including government audit reports, policy briefs, white papers, and case files from anti-corruption agencies and oversight institutions. These documents provided a broader institutional context and served as a vital source for triangulating interview data. This triangulation enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings, allowing the study to cross-verify narratives and build a robust picture of systemic patterns.

The analysis was guided by thematic analysis, which involved identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring themes in the data. Particular attention was paid to phenomena such as institutional shielding, loyalty-based networks, strategic delay, and soft resistance to reform. These concepts helped illuminate how informal bureaucratic alliances function as protective webs that shield corrupt practices from exposure or accountability.

Ethical considerations were central to this research. Given the high-risk nature of discussing corruption in Nigeria, the study ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent at every stage. Participants were briefed on the purpose

and potential use of the research, and all interviews were conducted with the utmost sensitivity to personal safety and professional implications.

While the study does not claim to produce statistically generalisable findings, its value lies in revealing the deeply embedded, human-driven logics that sustain corruption in Nigeria's bureaucratic landscape. It offers a rare, behind-the-scenes view of how everyday decisions, alliances, and silences within the public service can either uphold or quietly sabotage efforts at reform. By prioritising voices from within the system and situating them within institutional and policy contexts, this research contributes a grounded, nuanced understanding of corruption that numbers alone cannot capture.

## **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data collected from fifty in-depth interviews and an extensive review of relevant policy documents, audit reports, and agency records revealed critical insights into how bureaucratic collaboration both sustains and shields corruption within Nigeria's public service. This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, a widely respected method for analysing qualitative data that is both rigorous and accessible. The framework offers a systematic six-phase process

that guides researchers from raw data to meaningful insights. It begins with immersing oneself in the data; reading transcripts multiple times to gain a deep familiarity with the content. From there, the researcher identifies and codes significant features of the data, which are then grouped to form broader, recurring patterns or themes. These themes are reviewed, refined, and defined in relation to the research questions, ensuring they accurately capture the essence of what participants have shared. The final stage involves weaving these themes into a coherent narrative, supported by data excerpts and critical interpretation.

What makes Braun and Clarke's approach particularly valuable is its ability to reveal the subtle and often hidden meanings behind participants' words. Rather than imposing rigid categories, it allows the researcher to stay close to the data, listening for the underlying stories, concerns, and shared experiences that emerge organically. This makes it especially useful for research on sensitive and complex issues like corruption, where informal norms and personal experiences play a significant role. Thematic analysis, when applied thoughtfully, becomes not just a method of analysis but a way of giving voice to those whose insights might otherwise be overlooked. To this end three dominant themes emerged: (1) Institutional Shielding, (2) Loyalty and

Informal Networks, and (3) Resistance to Reform.

### **Theme One: Institutional Shielding**

One of the most pervasive and troubling patterns that emerged from the data was the phenomenon of institutional shielding, where bureaucracies appear to absorb and protect individuals involved in corrupt or unethical activities. This form of shielding is not merely a failure of accountability, it is a deliberate, often collective strategy used by civil servants to insulate one another from scrutiny. Participants consistently described a workplace culture where exposing malpractice was equated with betrayal, and whistleblowing was met with hostility rather than commendation. A mid-level procurement officer in a federal ministry painfully recalled, "Once you raise your voice against how contracts are awarded, you become the problem. You'll be transferred or frustrated out." This chilling testimony reveals how protective instincts within public institutions are weaponised to silence dissent and maintain the status quo.

The prevalence of such protectionist behaviour was not anecdotal. It surfaced repeatedly in interviews across federal, state, and local government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), cutting across hierarchical and geographic boundaries. Even more compelling was the evidence from document reviews.

Reports from internal disciplinary panels frequently recommended sanctions for misconduct, but these recommendations were either indefinitely shelved or buried in bureaucratic inertia. This institutional reluctance to discipline its own is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, a loyalty to colleagues over the public good, often justified by a shared understanding that “we all have something to lose.” The moral hazard created by this system is profound; it not only discourages accountability but actively breeds impunity. Shielding, in this context, becomes both a defensive mechanism and a silent pact, an unspoken contract that says: “Protect me today, and I’ll protect you tomorrow.”

### **Theme Two: Loyalty and Informal Networks**

Closely intertwined with institutional shielding is the theme of loyalty and informal networks. The civil service in Nigeria, while governed by formal rules and procedures, operates within an intricate web of informal relationships rooted in ethnicity, kinship, religion, and long-standing patron-client ties. These networks are often more powerful than official hierarchies, shaping who gets promoted, who gets protected, and who gets punished. As one senior civil servant in a state government office put it, “There are invisible hands protecting some people. It’s not in any memo, but everyone knows who not to touch.” This

insight reveals how informal power structures silently override formal authority, often rendering institutional rules ineffective.

Participants spoke candidly about how these networks distort organisational functioning. Recruitment and promotion processes, for instance, were often described as opaque and heavily influenced by “connections.” In some cases, those perceived as competent but unconnected were deliberately sidelined or overworked, while individuals within privileged circles advanced with little resistance. These relationships formed a system of reciprocal protection that extended across departments and agencies, creating a “deep state” of loyalty within the public service. Attempts at reform, particularly those that aim to dismantle or neutralise these informal alliances are often viewed with skepticism. Many respondents described anti-corruption policies that failed not because they were poorly designed, but because they underestimated the resilience and influence of these hidden loyalties. Thus, any reform initiative that does not address these informal dynamics risks being circumvented or merely performative.

### **Theme Three: Resistance to Reform**

Perhaps the most striking revelation of the study was the sheer resistance to reform embedded within the

bureaucratic system. While public sector reforms, such as the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIIS) and electronic procurement platforms, were introduced with the promise of enhancing transparency, their implementation has often been met with quiet, calculated sabotage. A former auditor revealed the subtlety of these acts: “On paper, everything looks clean. But insiders know how to delay uploads or manipulate numbers before they reach the system.” This manipulation was not haphazard; it was strategic and sustained, executed by individuals who had mastered the workings of both the old and new systems.

Rather than confront reform efforts head-on, civil servants developed tactics to give the illusion of compliance while preserving the benefits of the old order. For example, staff would participate in training for digital systems but continue using manual processes behind the scenes. Others would delay data input, insert false figures, or create parallel channels of communication that were immune to audit scrutiny. Documentary evidence from the Office of the Auditor General and ICPC supported these accounts. Repeat audit queries, flagging the same procedural violations year after year in the same institutions, pointed not to ignorance or incompetence but to deliberate, systemic non-compliance. Reform tools, rather than dismantling

entrenched interests, often became appropriated to serve them. This phenomenon reflects what scholars describe as institutional isomorphism without transformation, where organisations adopt the appearance of change while maintaining the same corrupt internal logic.

### **Towards a Systemic Understanding of Collusive Complicity**

Taken together, these themes present a sobering but necessary rethinking of how corruption operates within the Nigerian bureaucracy. It is not merely a problem of a few “bad apples” acting in isolation, but a deeply embedded system of collusive complicity. These bureaucrats do not simply exploit loopholes, they are active agents in preserving them. Their actions are sustained by a mix of fear, loyalty, self-preservation, and collective silence. What emerges, then, is a picture of corruption as a social ecosystem, where formal rules are consistently undermined by informal alliances, and reform is resisted not by ignorance, but by design.

These findings strongly validate theoretical perspectives on political and bureaucratic settlements, which argue that the real rules of governance are often negotiated informally and enforced through networks of mutual interest. For anti-corruption efforts to be effective, they must move beyond surface-level

interventions and grapple with the underlying political economy of the public service. This means recognising the emotional, relational, and survival-based motivations of those within the system, and designing reforms that are not only technically sound but also socially and politically intelligent. Without this shift, reforms will continue to be met with resistance, not because change is impossible, but because it threatens the very foundations of an unwritten code that holds the system together.

### **Summary of Findings**

The research aimed at examining ways through which bureaucratic cooperation fuels corruption in Nigeria whereby corruption has endured for decades despite efforts aimed at fighting it. The research based on qualitative data from interviews and reviews of documents found a highly embedded culture of mutual defense between civil servants critical to undermining both reform and transparency efforts.

The research identified three key patterns. First, the practice of institutional shielding pervades officialdom wherein government officials shield their fellow officials from sanctions, investigations, or disciplinary procedures. Shielding often takes the form of delayed internal procedures, compromised oversight, or falsified documents. Second, the

research found that unofficial networks rooted in ethnicity, loyalty, seniority, or common interests compounded bureaucratic behavior in powerful ways. These unofficial networks function alongside official institutions but exercise considerable sway over appointments and promotions and even the effectiveness or failure of anti-bribery policies. Third, resistance to reform was high and in particular when reform imperiled established unofficial benefits or upset established client-patron systems of equity and rewards. In numerous cases, civil officials actively conspired to undermine or neutralise anti-bribery technologies and systems aimed at promoting enhanced overview and disclosure.

These results uphold the fact that corruption in the Nigerian public service is not the outcome of single instances of misconduct but it's structurally ingrained in the operation of the bureaucracy. It's underpinned by a set of internal alliances and cultural mores rewarding complicity rather than whistleblowing. This goes in line with both Institutional Theory and the Political Settlements Framework which propose that actual operation of institutions is influenced less via formal regulations and rather through everyday practices and relations of power.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, crafting meaningful anti-corruption policy in Nigeria demands a shift away from narrow, punitive, and overly centralised approaches. While sanctions and surveillance may have symbolic value, they often fail to penetrate the everyday realities of how corruption is sustained within the civil service. What this study underscores is that corruption is not merely a collection of individual transgressions, it is embedded in a web of mutual protection, informal alliances, and shared institutional habits that shape how the system operates from within.

Therefore, any serious reform must begin by acknowledging the deeply relational and adaptive nature of bureaucratic collaboration. Policies should be rooted in a nuanced understanding of how civil servants navigate risk, build trust among peers, and preserve networks that insulate them from external accountability. This requires interventions that go beyond surface-level compliance and instead reconfigure the incentives that govern bureaucratic life. Internal cultures must be reoriented to reward transparency, support ethical resistance, and foster accountability from within, particularly from the bottom up. Without this grounded, systemic perspective, anti-corruption efforts risk becoming performative gestures, well-intentioned but ultimately disconnected

from the lived experiences of those who make the state function or fail. Real transformation lies not in punishing a few but in reshaping the environment that makes misconduct appear necessary, safe, or even rational.

## Recommendations

From the results of this research, the recommendations below are made in a bid to consolidate anti-corruption and tackle the collaborative dynamics supporting corruption in the bureaucracy of Nigeria:

- 1. Strengthen Internal Accountability Mechanisms:** The anti-corruption efforts must focus on internal accountability systems at the ministries, agencies, and departments. The internal audit bodies must be strengthened, disciplinary committees made independent and compliance ensured on recommendations from audits in order to minimize the room for bureaucratic shielding.
- 2. Institutional Culture Change Programs:** There must be a change of organisational culture in order to effect long-term change. The federal and state governments must invest in ongoing ethics education and integrity-building workshops and peer-review programs challenging the normalisation of corrupt behavior by civil servants.

3. **Merit Recruitment and Promotion:** Streamlining the civil service for transparent and merit-based recruitment, postings and promotions will break the grip of unofficial patronage networks. Institutions such as the Federal Civil Service Commission should be strengthened in order to resist internal and government pressure.
4. **Whistleblower Incentives and Protection:** The Whistleblower Act should be made stronger by the government so that civil servants who reveal malpractice will be well-protected from retribution. Incentive schemes should also be institutionalized and funded properly.
5. **Promote More Collaboration between Anti-Corruption Agencies and Civil Society:** The EFCC and ICPC should interact more frequently with civil society organizations and autonomous monitors so as to enhance external pressure and publicity. Involvement of the general populace in oversight would prevent collusive behavior in the bureaucracy.
6. **Data and Technology-Driven Monitoring and Transparency:** Digitization initiatives such as the IPPIS and TSA must be increased but coupled with enhanced monitoring and cross-checking mechanisms. Independent audit and realtime data

dashboards can assist in internal party manipulation detection.

### **Suggested Areas of Research**

Though this research yields useful information on bureaucratic cooperation and corruption, it also leaves open areas for future research:

1. **Comparative Regional Analysis:** Future research would be able to compare the ways bureaucratic corruption operates in various geopolitical areas of Nigeria in relation to differences in political cultures, allocations of resources, and institutional capacity.
2. **Gender Dynamics in Bureaucratic Corruption:** Exploring how gender influences participation in bureaucratic networks and exposure to corruption would offer a more nuanced understanding of power relations within the public sector.
3. **The Role of Junior vs. Senior Officials:** Further research could examine how collaboration across hierarchical levels (junior vs. senior civil servants) impacts corruption dynamics, especially in local governments where oversight is weaker.
4. **Impact of Digital Reforms on Bureaucratic Practices:** A longitudinal study assessing how e-governance tools affect internal bureaucratic behavior over time

could provide evidence for refining digital anti-corruption strategies.

- 5. Cross-Institutional Collaboration in Anti-Corruption Efforts:** Investigating how agencies (EFCC, ICPC, civil service commissions, etc.) interact and sometimes compete or duplicate efforts, could reveal systemic inefficiencies that weaken the broader fight against corruption.

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