NJSR
Nwaebere Journal of Scientific Research
Faculty of Social Sciences, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria • imsufoss.com
Vol. 1 • No. 1
November 2026
pp. 35–43

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS DOUBLE-BLIND PEER REVIEWED

Corruption and National Development in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Anti-Corruption War of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration, 2015–2023

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.68442/njsr/2026/v1i1.004

RECEIVED	REVISED	ACCEPTED	PUBLISHED
18 September 2026	5 October 2026	5 November 2026	7 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Corruption has long been identified as a central obstacle to Nigeria's development, and President Muhammadu Buhari came to power in 2015 promising to make the fight against it a priority. This study examined the relationship between corruption and national development in Nigeria and assessed the anti-corruption war of the Buhari administration between 2015 and 2023. It was guided by structural-functional theory and adopted a qualitative documentary design, drawing on peer-reviewed studies, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, official statistics and reports of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which were analysed thematically. The study found that corruption has diverted public resources, weakened institutions, discouraged investment and deepened poverty, with clear consequences for Nigeria's socio-economic and political development. The administration introduced important measures, including the Treasury Single Account, the whistle-blowing policy and stronger asset recovery, and the EFCC recorded a sharp rise in convictions, reaching 3,785 in 2022. However, Nigeria's score on the Corruption Perceptions Index fell from 28 in 2016 to 24 in 2021 and 2022, and the campaign was widely perceived as selective, focused on opponents of the ruling party and weakened by political interference and conflict among agencies. The study concludes that the anti-corruption war produced institutional gains but did not reduce systemic corruption. It recommends full operational independence for anti-corruption agencies, special anti-corruption courts, a whistle-blower protection law and impartial enforcement.

KEYWORDS Corruption • National development • Anti-corruption • Buhari administration • EFCC • Nigeria

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE • APA 7
Onyeiwu, E. A., & Ihekwuaba, B. O. (2026). Corruption and national development in Nigeria: An assessment of the anti-corruption war of the Muhammadu Buhari administration, 2015–2023. *Nwaebere Journal of Scientific Research, 1*(1), 35–43. https://doi.org/10.68442/njsr/2026/v1i1.004

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria gained independence on 1 October 1960 after a century of British rule, and with it the authority to direct its own economic, political and social affairs. After long periods of military rule, the country returned to civilian government in 1999 with high hopes of good governance. Throughout these periods, corruption has been one of the most persistent obstacles to development. It diverts funds meant for roads, schools, hospitals and power to private hands, weakens the institutions that should deliver public services and erodes public trust in the state (Agbiboa, 2012; Ogundiya, 2009).

Successive governments have responded with anti-corruption laws and agencies. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) was established in 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003, both under the Obasanjo administration. Studies of these earlier efforts found that they achieved some high-profile prosecutions but were resisted by entrenched elite interests and often appeared to target political opponents (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011). Corruption under the Jonathan administration became a central issue in the 2015 general elections, and Muhammadu Buhari won the presidency on a platform that placed the fight against corruption alongside security and the economy (Ahmed, 2018).

The Buhari administration (2015–2023) introduced a range of measures, including the Treasury Single Account, a whistle-blowing policy and an intensified programme of asset recovery and prosecution (Amin et al., 2025; Letsuwa et al., 2026). Supporters described the campaign as the most determined in Nigeria's history. Critics argued that it was selective, that it spared allies of the ruling party and that corruption remained as entrenched as before (Ahmed, 2018; Edeh et al., 2022). Nigeria's position on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index did not improve over the period. This study examines the relationship between corruption and national development in Nigeria and assesses what the Buhari administration's anti-corruption war achieved.

Statement of the Problem

Corruption is widely regarded as one of the basic problems affecting Nigeria's development. It has contributed to poor infrastructure, weak public services, high poverty and unemployment, and low trust in government (Agbiboa, 2012). Much of the problem lies with those who hold public office: elected and appointed officials have diverted public funds, and corruption has spread from the public service into the private sector (Ogundiya, 2009). Corruption also feeds political tension, as competition for control of public resources sharpens ethnic and partisan divisions.

The Buhari administration made the fight against corruption a central promise. Eight years later, however, there is no agreement on what it achieved. Official figures point to more convictions and recoveries, while perception indices and critical studies suggest that corruption was not reduced and that enforcement was uneven (Edeh et al., 2022; Ngini et al., 2025). This disagreement makes it necessary to bring the evidence together and to assess the anti-corruption war against its stated goal of reducing corruption and promoting national development.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective was to examine corruption and national development in Nigeria with reference to the anti-corruption war of the Buhari administration (2015–2023). The specific objectives were to:

i. examine the effect of corruption on the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria; and
ii. assess the measures, achievements and limitations of the anti-corruption war of the Buhari administration.

Research Questions

1. How has corruption affected the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria?
2. What did the anti-corruption war of the Buhari administration achieve, and what limited its effectiveness?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Corruption

Corruption is difficult to define precisely, although its consequences are easy to recognise. Transparency International defines it as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, and the World Bank as the abuse of public office for private gain. Public office is abused when an official accepts, solicits or extorts a bribe, and also when private agents offer bribes to circumvent public policies for competitive advantage. Corruption need not involve bribery: it includes patronage, nepotism, the theft of state assets and the diversion of state resources. Khan (1996) described corruption as behaviour that deviates from the formal rules governing the conduct of a person in a position of public authority because of private motives such as wealth, power or status.

Scholars distinguish petty corruption, which involves small payments in everyday dealings with officials, from grand corruption, in which senior officials divert large sums or shape policy for private ends, and political corruption, which involves the misuse of power by political decision-makers to sustain their power and wealth (Ogundiya, 2009). In Nigeria, corruption has been described as systemic, meaning that it is the expected rather than the exceptional form of behaviour in many public settings (Agbiboa, 2012; Ijewereme, 2015). Persson et al. (2013) argue that when corruption is systemic, it becomes a collective action problem: individuals see little benefit in behaving honestly if they expect others to remain corrupt, so that measures which assume a few deviant officials are likely to fail.

The Concept of National Development

National development has no single accepted definition, but it is generally understood as sustained improvement in the living conditions of a country's population and in the capacity of its institutions. It includes economic growth and rising incomes; reductions in poverty, unemployment and disease; better infrastructure such as roads, power and water; expanded access to education and health care; and political stability and accountable governance. A country may be said to be developing when it shows steady progress on these indicators, and underdeveloped when there is little improvement or even decline.

Development thinking has also moved beyond growth alone. Sen (1999) defined development as the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy, including freedom from hunger, ill-health and illiteracy and the freedom to take part in political life. On this view, corruption harms development not only by reducing growth but by denying citizens the services and the voice that make such freedoms possible. National development in this study therefore refers to improvements in economic welfare, social services, infrastructure and political accountability taken together.

Forms of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption in Nigeria takes several recurring forms. In public finance, it includes inflated contracts, kickbacks in procurement, diversion of budgeted funds and payroll fraud through ghost workers (Ijewereme, 2015). In the oil sector, which has provided most government revenue, it has involved the under-remittance of revenue and abuses in subsidy and allocation processes (Agbiboa, 2012). In public administration, it includes bribery for services, nepotism in recruitment and promotion, and the sale of official favours. In politics, it includes the use of public funds for campaigns and patronage and the use of anti-corruption institutions against opponents (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011; Ogundiya, 2009). These forms are connected: political competition depends on access to public resources, and the need to fund that competition drives corruption in public finance and administration.

Corruption and Development

A large body of research links corruption to weaker development. In a cross-country study, Mauro (1995) found that corruption was associated with lower investment and therefore lower economic growth. Corruption raises the cost of doing business, distorts public spending towards projects that offer opportunities for rent-seeking and reduces the quality of public infrastructure and services. In Nigeria, Agbiboa (2012) described corruption as a form of state robbery that has drained resources from development, while Ijewereme (2015) traced its roots in the public sector to weak institutions, poor remuneration and a culture that tolerates illicit wealth. Ocheje (2018) argued that Nigeria's anti-corruption laws have been weakened less by their content than by social norms and institutions that are tolerant of corruption.

Anti-Corruption Efforts before 2015

Anti-corruption campaigns are not new in Nigeria. Military regimes in the 1970s and 1980s dismissed thousands of public officers and launched campaigns against indiscipline, including the War Against Indiscipline of the first Buhari regime (1984–1985). These campaigns produced short-term fear rather than lasting institutional change, partly because they depended on decrees and on the will of individual rulers rather than on independent institutions (Ogundiya, 2009). The return to civilian rule in 1999 brought a more institutional approach. The Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act of 2000 created the ICPC, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (Establishment) Act created the EFCC, which became the most visible anti-corruption body in the country.

Adebanwi and Obadare (2011) showed that the EFCC under the Obasanjo administration secured convictions of senior officials, including a former Inspector-General of Police, but that its work provoked a backlash from powerful interests and was widely seen as serving the political aims of the government of the day. Under later administrations, the agencies continued to prosecute cases, but long trials, weak sentences and political protection limited their impact. Smith (2007) explained the persistence of corruption through the everyday social obligations that tie public officials to kin, communities and patrons, which make illicit gain both expected and condemned. The history of these efforts shows that the effectiveness of anti-corruption campaigns in Nigeria has depended less on the existence of agencies than on their independence, the impartiality of enforcement and the social environment in which they operate (Ocheje, 2018).

Empirical Review of the Buhari Anti-Corruption War

Studies of the Buhari administration's anti-corruption war reach mixed conclusions. Ahmed (2018) argued that the campaign had raised public awareness of corruption but had also become politicised, as members of the political elite who joined the ruling party appeared to escape scrutiny. Edeh et al. (2022) examined the performance of the EFCC between 2015 and 2020 and found that the Commission had shown commitment to fighting cybercrime but had not significantly reduced money laundering or the embezzlement of public funds. Bello and Cosmas (2022) concluded that political interference limited the EFCC's role, although the agency had helped to reduce corruption in parts of the public sector.

More recent studies take a longer view. Amin et al. (2025) found that reforms such as the Treasury Single Account and the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System improved financial management and transparency but did not transform the ethical culture of the public service. Letsuwa et al. (2026) found that the whistle-blowing policy introduced in 2016 helped expose corrupt practices and recover funds, but that its impact was limited by the absence of a whistle-blower protection law and by fear of retaliation. Ngini et al. (2025), assessing the EFCC between 2015 and 2024, found that prosecutions, convictions and asset recoveries increased but concluded that the Commission's actions in several high-profile cases reflected selective justice rather than systemic reform. Together these studies suggest real institutional gains alongside persistent problems of selectivity, interference and weak deterrence.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts structural-functional theory as developed in political science by Gabriel Almond and his colleagues (Almond & Powell, 1966). The theory views the political system as a set of structures, such as the executive, legislature, judiciary, bureaucracy and agencies, each of which performs functions necessary for the survival and effectiveness of the system. It asks two questions: which functions must be performed for the system to persist, and which structures are needed to perform them adequately. When structures fail to perform their functions, the system becomes dysfunctional.

Applied to this study, the theory treats the anti-corruption agencies, the judiciary and the executive as structures whose function is to uphold accountability and protect public resources for development. Corruption represents a failure of these structures: funds meant for development are diverted, and the institutions created to prevent this either lack capacity or are captured by political interests. The theory therefore directs attention to whether the structures of the anti-corruption system under the Buhari administration performed their functions effectively and impartially. A limitation of the theory is that it says little about why structures fail. For this reason, the study also draws on the collective action perspective of Persson et al. (2013), which explains why reforms that rely on enforcement alone tend to fail where corruption is systemic.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. This design was appropriate because the questions concern national patterns over an eight-year period, for which published evidence and official data are the most reliable sources. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles on corruption and the Buhari administration's anti-corruption measures; Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2015 to 2023; official statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics; and published figures on EFCC convictions. Sources were selected purposively for their relevance to the two research questions and were checked against bibliographic databases. The material was analysed thematically: evidence was grouped under the effects of corruption on development, the measures taken by the administration, the outcomes recorded and the limitations identified, and the themes were interpreted through structural-functional theory.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Corruption and Nigeria's Development

The evidence shows that corruption has had wide-ranging effects on Nigeria's development. Economically, it has diverted public revenue, inflated the cost of public projects and discouraged investment, consistent with cross-national evidence linking corruption to lower investment and growth (Mauro, 1995). Projects are abandoned or poorly executed when funds are diverted, leaving gaps in roads, power, water and health facilities (Agbiboa, 2012). Socially, these losses translate into persistent poverty: the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) estimated that 63% of Nigerians, about 133 million people, were multidimensionally poor. Politically, corruption has undermined trust in public institutions and turned competition for office into competition for access to public resources, which sharpens ethnic and partisan conflict (Ogundiya, 2009).

From a structural-functional standpoint, these outcomes indicate that the structures responsible for allocating and safeguarding public resources have not performed their functions. The problem is not the absence of institutions: Nigeria has had anti-corruption laws and agencies since 2000. It is that these institutions operate within a political environment that tolerates or rewards corruption, and within social norms that accept illicit wealth (Ocheje, 2018).

Corruption and National Security

One of the clearest links between corruption and development in the period concerns national security. Nigeria faced insurgency in the North-East, banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and North-Central, and separatist agitation and violence in the South-East during the Buhari years. Mikail et al. (2026), drawing on interviews, found that corruption led to the mismanagement of security resources, weakened security institutions and contributed to rising insecurity, despite the administration's anti-corruption measures. When funds meant for equipment, welfare and operations are diverted, the capacity of security agencies falls, insecurity disrupts farming, trade and schooling, and the conditions for development are further weakened. Corruption and insecurity therefore reinforce each other.

Corruption and Public Services

Corruption also affects the quality of public services that underpin human development. Diversion of funds and padded contracts reduce what reaches schools and hospitals, while bribery and nepotism in recruitment weaken the competence of the public service (Ijewereme, 2015). Payroll fraud, including the presence of ghost workers, inflates the cost of government without adding to services, which is why payroll reforms such as IPPIS were introduced (Amin et al., 2025). The combined effect is a state that spends without delivering, and citizens who lose confidence in public institutions.

Measures Taken by the Buhari Administration

Table 1 summarises the main measures associated with the administration's anti-corruption war and the limitations reported in the literature.

Table 1. *Main anti-corruption measures of the Buhari administration, 2015–2023*

Measure	Purpose	Reported outcome or limitation
Treasury Single Account (TSA)	Consolidate government revenue in one account to reduce leakages	Improved financial management and transparency; limited effect on ethical culture (Amin et al., 2025)

Measure	Purpose	Reported outcome or limitation
Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS)	Remove ghost workers and control payroll fraud	Improved compliance and accountability (Amin et al., 2025)
Whistle-blowing policy (2016)	Reward citizens who report looted funds	Exposed cases and aided recoveries; no whistle-blower protection law (Letsuwa et al., 2026)
Strengthened EFCC prosecutions and asset recovery	Prosecute offenders and recover stolen assets	More convictions and recoveries; concerns about selectivity (Ngini et al., 2025)
Cybercrime enforcement	Reduce internet fraud	Strong focus on cybercrime; weaker results on embezzlement (Edeh et al., 2022)

Source: Compiled by the authors from the sources indicated.

The administration's measures had real institutional effects. The Treasury Single Account and payroll reforms reduced opportunities for leakage in government finances (Amin et al., 2025). The whistle-blowing policy brought citizens into the detection of corruption and led to recoveries of funds (Letsuwa et al., 2026). The EFCC's conviction record rose sharply: the Commission reported 976 convictions in 2020, 2,220 in 2021 and 3,785 in 2022, the highest annual figure since its establishment (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, as reported by ThisDay, 2023). These figures indicate that the enforcement structures were more active than in earlier periods.

Corruption Perceptions over the Period

Table 2. *Nigeria's score and rank on the Corruption Perceptions Index, 2015–2023*

Year	Score (0–100)	Rank
2015	26	136
2016	28	136
2017	27	148
2018	27	144
2019	26	146
2020	25	149
2021	24	154
2022	24	150
2023	25	145

Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index, annual releases 2015–2023. A higher score indicates lower perceived corruption; 180 countries were ranked from 2017.

Despite these gains, perceptions of corruption did not improve. As Table 2 shows, Nigeria's score rose to 28 in 2016 but then declined to 24 in 2021 and 2022, its lowest level in the period, and its rank fell from 136th to as low as 154th. The score of 25 recorded for 2023, the year the administration left office, remained among the lowest in the world. Perception indices have limitations, since they measure the views of experts and business people rather than actual corrupt transactions. Nevertheless, the trend is difficult to reconcile with the claim that the anti-corruption war reduced corruption.

Limitations of the Anti-Corruption War

The literature identifies four main reasons why institutional activity did not translate into a reduction in corruption. First, the campaign was widely perceived as selective. Several studies conclude that prosecutions fell more heavily on members of the opposition, while politicians who defected to the ruling party, or who were close to the administration, appeared to escape scrutiny (Ahmed, 2018; Ngini et al., 2025). Selective enforcement weakens deterrence, because it signals that political loyalty rather than conduct determines whether an official is prosecuted.

Second, the anti-corruption agencies lacked full independence. Political interference in the work of the EFCC has been identified as a major constraint (Bello & Cosmas, 2022), and conflict and poor coordination among agencies further weakened their effectiveness (Ngini et al., 2025). Third, enforcement was concentrated on certain offences. Edeh et al. (2022) found that the EFCC was more effective against cybercrime than against

money laundering and the embezzlement of public funds, which are the forms of corruption most damaging to national development. Fourth, the legal and judicial environment remained weak: slow trials, the absence of special anti-corruption courts and the lack of a whistle-blower protection law reduced the certainty of punishment and the willingness of citizens to report (Letsuwa et al., 2026).

These findings are consistent with structural-functional theory: the structures of the anti-corruption system were more active, but they did not perform their function impartially or completely. They are also consistent with the collective action perspective. Where corruption is systemic, enforcement that appears selective cannot change expectations about how others will behave, and so cannot change behaviour (Persson et al., 2013). The experience of earlier administrations, in which anti-corruption campaigns were resisted by elite interests and used against rivals (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011), appears to have been repeated.

On balance, the evidence supports a balanced assessment. The Buhari administration strengthened some financial controls, raised the volume of prosecutions and convictions and kept corruption at the centre of public debate. It did not, however, reduce systemic corruption, as perception indices show, and its credibility was undermined by selectivity and interference. The gains in national development that should have followed from a successful campaign were therefore limited.

Why Enforcement Did Not Change Perceptions

The contrast between rising convictions and declining perception scores deserves explanation. Part of it lies in what was being counted. A large share of enforcement activity concerned cybercrime and smaller financial offences, which do little to change how experts and business people view the integrity of the state (Edeh et al., 2022). Grand corruption cases involving senior officials moved slowly through the courts, and several ended without conviction or with convictions later overturned on procedural grounds. Another part lies in credibility. When citizens and observers believe that enforcement depends on political loyalty, even genuine prosecutions are seen as partisan, and the deterrent message is lost (Ahmed, 2018; Ngini et al., 2025).

A third part lies in the nature of systemic corruption itself. Persson et al. (2013) argue that where corruption is the norm, reforms that rely on monitoring and punishment assume the existence of principled enforcers who may not exist. The problem then becomes one of changing shared expectations, which requires visible impartiality, credible institutions and broad social support. The Buhari administration's measures addressed some opportunities for corruption, especially in public finance, but did less to change the expectations of public officials and citizens. Ocheje's (2018) argument that social norms tolerant of corruption have constrained Nigerian anti-corruption law applies with equal force to this period.

Implications for Policy

The findings have three implications. First, future anti-corruption efforts should be judged by their effect on grand corruption and on the management of public funds, not only by the number of convictions. Second, the credibility of the anti-corruption system depends on independence and impartiality; reforms that reduce executive control over the agencies are therefore as important as reforms that increase their powers. Third, the reforms that worked best under the Buhari administration, such as the Treasury Single Account and payroll controls, were those that reduced discretion and increased transparency in routine transactions. Extending such systems to procurement, revenue collection and the oil sector offers a more durable path than reliance on prosecutions alone.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined corruption and national development in Nigeria with reference to the anti-corruption war of the Buhari administration. It found that corruption has diverted public resources, weakened institutions and contributed to persistent poverty and political tension. The administration introduced important reforms and increased enforcement, but Nigeria's Corruption Perceptions Index score did not improve and the campaign was widely regarded as selective and subject to political interference. The sustainability of Nigeria's democracy and the progress of its development depend on whether future governments can build anti-corruption institutions that act independently and impartially, and on whether society comes to reject rather than tolerate illicit wealth.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The EFCC and ICPC should be granted full operational and financial independence through legislative reform, with heads appointed and removed through transparent processes that limit executive control.
2. Special anti-corruption courts should be established to speed up the trial of corruption cases and improve the certainty of punishment.
3. The National Assembly should enact a full whistle-blower protection law to complement the whistle-blowing policy.
4. Anti-corruption laws should be enforced impartially, regardless of political affiliation, and politicians under investigation should not be shielded because they change party.
5. Government, civil society, religious bodies and the media should pursue sustained public reorientation to challenge the social acceptance of illicit wealth.

DECLARATIONS

Competing interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

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