



PUBLIC DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND LOW COMPLIANCE WITH POLICY MEASURES IN NIGERIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A DIAGNOSIS OF PRE-EXISTING GOVERNANCE UNDERCURRENTS¹

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Abstract. *Following the discovery of the index case of COVID-19 infection in Nigeria in February 2020, the government instituted policy measures, such as travels restrictions, social distancing, mandatory wearing of face masks, outlawing of large assemblies, among others, to contain the disease. However, the majority of Nigerians distrusted the government amidst response to the pandemic, and thus there was low compliance with the preventive measures, though with catastrophic consequence. Indeed, there was an astronomical rise in the number of the coronavirus infections in nearly all the states in the country, inclusive of Abuja. This paper argues that the triggers of the citizens' distrust in the Nigerian government and low compliance with its COVID-19 containment policy initiatives that created this unwholesome scenario did not emanate from the pandemic's context itself, but from pre-existing substantial governance issues in the country. These includes the experiences of the government's management of previous nationwide emergencies; the problem of bad, irresponsible, and irresponsive political leadership; pervasive corruption and impunity within the government, to name a few. Accordingly, the study concludes by recommending potent strategies for reversing the subsisting trend of public distrust in the government and low adherence to its regulatory policies in future emergencies, including the need for the Nigerian Federal Government to revisit, investigate, and prosecute alleged cases of corruption perpetrated by the officials of relevant government agencies amid response to past national emergencies, among others. The study depends on data obtained from secondary sources and analysed through the qualitative content analysis and thematic methods.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Governance, Nigeria, Policy Compliance, Public Trust.*

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 disease that was sparked by the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020), was initially announced on 29 December 2019 by Chinese Health Authorities subsequent to a surge of pneumonia of unidentified source in Wuhan, Hubei Province (The 2019-nCoV Outbreak Joint Field Epidemiology Investigation Team & Li, 2020). Thereafter, the virus quickly spread to several other countries across the world with devastating effects on health, economy, and quality of life of societies (Hassan *et al.*, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 infection in Nigeria was spotted and confirmed in Lagos State on 27 February 2020 by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, a constituent of the Laboratory Network of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) (Federal Ministry of Health, 2020). The index case was an Italian citizen, who flew into Lagos International Airport from Milan (Hassan *et al.*, 2020). The Italian man served as the “importer” of COVID-19 virus that eventually spread to 35 of the 36 states of Nigeria, alongside Abuja, its Federal Capital Territory (FCT) (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020).

In response to the sudden spread of the disease in the country, both the federal and state governments took diverse pragmatic actions to contain it. Measures taken included, but not limited to discontinuation of flights, inspected self-isolation for people returning from overseas, ceaseless contact tracing, banning of cross-state travels, country-wide closure of educational institutions of all categories, social distancing and proscription of religious assemblings and other dense meetings (Reuben, 2020). Most State Governments also imposed sit-at-home directives. Nonetheless, from 27 February to 31 May 2020, 10,162 people had tested positive for COVID-19 in Nigeria (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020), and out of the confirmed cases, 287 deaths were announced by the country’s health authorities during the period (NCDC, 2020). Nigeria, at this time, had come to appreciate the monumental humanitarian catastrophe being induced by the virus. Yet, many Nigerians remained indifferent to this reality as they mostly distrust their government, *ab initio*.

Citizens’ trust in government or the political class is an important element for proper and beneficial handling of crisis situation at all times, and any government that lacks this trust suffers significant disadvantages (Adeolu-Akande, 2022). Nigeria is one of such countries as existent studies reveal that her citizens do not have trust in the government, and hence do not typically adequately abide by its diverse rules (Adeolu-Akande, 2022). Thus, at the peak of the pandemic, many Nigerians flagrantly disobeyed government approved containment policies, and unconcernedly went about their daily business (Abayomi, 2024). Resultantly, “as of June

30, 2020, Nigeria recorded 25,694 COVID-19 cases, 590 deaths and 9,746 recoveries” (Hassan *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). It became recognized, therefore, that the problem of lack of citizens’ confidence in the government was a major challenge in the fight against the coronavirus infection in Nigeria.

This paper argues that Nigerians’ show of distrust in their government and low compliance with its formal COVID-19 containment regulations, was due to existing fundamental governance concerns that have undermined public trust in the government for many years in the country. That is, the problems did not necessarily arise from the COVID-19 context, rather they have been in existence in the country long before the outbreak of the virus. As its objective, therefore, the study examines the pre-existent governance problems in Nigeria that instigated public distrust in the government and low compliance with its established COVID-19 prevention policy measures during the pandemic. To achieve this objective, the study relies on data gathered from secondary sources, and analysed through the qualitative content analysis and thematic procedures.

2. Literature review

The vast body of literature on public health emergency management sufficiently documents the imperative of citizens’ trust in government and its health authorities at any time when public health is threatened by the presence of any epidemic diseases. Blair *et al.* (2022) write that the majority of extant researches illustrate that the link between trust in government and conformity to public health directives is uncomplicated and forthright. It is required that citizens trust government health establishments to examine public health menaces properly and prescribe policies to ameliorate them adequately. The citizenry is desired to trust popularly selected government representatives to authorize and institute those policies swiftly and devotedly, and believe in law enforcing institutions to force them dispassionately. They are also required to have confidence in the safeness and effectiveness of medications and vaccines that are mostly invented by independent organizations (Blair *et al.*, 2022).

A considerable number of studies demonstrate the significance of trust as an indicator of adherence to regulations during past public health crises, particularly the 2013-2016 Ebola disease outbreak in West Africa, and the 2018-2019 Ebola catastrophe in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Blair *et al.*, 2022). Experiences from the SARS epidemic also revealed that citizens’ level of confidence in the government typified a pivotal factor for enhancing the efficacy and success of the mechanisms instituted by the government to prevent

the spreading of the disease (Beardmore & Gibbons, 2020). New researches have also typified the several ways that citizens' trust in government influenced their disposition to obey public health orders at the time of the COVID-19 epidemic (Lalot *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, the level of conformity to the coronavirus preventive measures was inevitably dependent on the degree of trust that citizens have in their governments and related agencies across societies. For instance, in the USA, a study reveals that counties with considerable trust in government reduced their movement remarkably more than counties with insignificant trust after the imposition of lockdowns. In the UK, another study shows that population that displayed higher trust in government turned out to be better disposed to conform to government-instituted social distancing guidelines (Blair *et al.*, 2022).

The implications of violation of the policies were, regardless, generally grievous. Negative response to the COVID-19 public health guidelines was connected with significant increase in the cases of the infection in nations across the world (Flaxman *et al.*, 2020). In Europe, a study discovers that trust in government was negatively connected with deaths from COVID-19 spanning twenty-five (25) countries (Oksanen *et al.*, 2020). Meanwhile, in some contexts, such as the USA, this connection was managed through participation (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2022; Grossman *et al.*, 2020). These researches augment and broaden the extant literature focusing on the interconnection between trust and compliancy in the times of previous pandemics, inclusive of Ebola, HIV/AIDS, and H1N1 (Blair *et al.*, 2022). The findings of the studies characterized the reality about compliance to COVID-19 safety guidelines across countries.

3. Theoretical Foundation

The study relies on the Theory of Trust as a basic analytical framework, in its attempts to explain the connection between the pre-existing governance challenges in Nigeria and citizens' distrust in the government and the resultant low compliance with formal regulations instituted to stifle the COVID-19 Pandemic in the country. Hill & O'Hara (2006) state that trust remains a pivotal element of human interrelationship and a confirmed constituent of a healthy society. They go on to describe trust as an intricate psychological appraisal of an individual's reliability, which is done through both intentional and unintentional procedures. For Simpson & Vieth (2021), trust mirrors the psychological inclination of an actor (the truster) about a certain partner (the trustee) with whom the actor has some degree of interdependence relationship. Kramer and Carnevale (2001) also hold that trust encompasses an array of beliefs, expectations, and

attributes that a partner will constantly act in the benefit of one's own best interests over time, particularly in circumstances where a person has to depend on their partner to accomplish some paramount aims and results.

This is consistent with the principal conception of trust, which is considered to be predicated on reliance that arises from experiences, encounters, and performances (Wierzbicki, 2010). It is this experience, encounter, and performance that influences a trustor's attitude of trust or distrust towards a trustee. As Wierzbicki (2010) puts it, it is the experience (that a trustor has had with a trustee) that eventuate into trust and/or distrust in the interaction amongst the trustor and the trustee. Hill & O'Hara (2006) amplify this position as they argue that building an interrelationship with someone generally prompts getting a complete long-term understanding of how dependable the individual is, and a precise idea of individual's dependability in specific circumstances. Impliedly, in their relationship, the perception and expression of trust or distrust by the trustor towards the trustee depends on how the trustee manages whatever is committed to his or her care. Castelfranchi & Falcone (2011) explain, therefore, with emphasis on beliefs, appraisals, and expectations that trust is essentially a cognitive situation, a complicated behaviour done by an agent X to another agent Y concerning the act/deed A related to the outcome (goal) G.

Interpreted through the lens of the crux of the argument of the Theory of Trust, the distrust and low compliance among Nigerians (trustor[s]) with the regulations set by their government (trustee) to contain the COVID-19 infection stemmed from the widely-acknowledged untrustworthiness of the government (trustee) by the citizens (trustor[s]). This deriving from the experiences of breach of public trust that the Nigerian government (trustee) has consistently exhibited in various circumstances and in all aspects of its relationship with the citizens (trustor[s]) over the years preceding the outbreak of the coronavirus. Abayomi (2024) posits that the advantage of a trustful relation amongst a government and its populace is underscored by the fact the citizens are increasingly inclined to respect and follow government policy directives amid emergencies like the novel COVID-19 epidemic. Contrary to this, the untrustworthy behaviour of the Nigerian government was consequently responsible for the citizens' uncooperative attitude towards it, which was evident in the low-level of compliance with its established policy initiatives aimed at preventing the diffusion of coronavirus in the country during its outbreak. The implication, therefore, is that Nigerians' lack of trust in their government negatively affected their obligations and obedience to the government during the

coronavirus pandemic, which did not augur well for the success of the overall government's strategies to control the disease in the country.

4. Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a systematic review method in examining the subject matter under consideration. A systematic review allows for the collection, review and analysis of the results of all existent and accessible empirical and theoretical studies related to the topic of any given research (Kang, 2015). The method is especially suitable for this study as it does not gather primary data, but rather relies on existing published scholarly data. The technique guarantees that the review is conducted along coherently defined procedures for searching, selecting, and evaluating academic data sources. By analysing the results of diverse publications, the study offers comprehensive insights foregrounded in recognized academic literature.

The study basically depends on data derived from secondary sources, including journals articles, books, newspapers reports, government reports, and other relevant documents derivable from the websites. The study resorts to articles published in well-established academic journals, which are considered appropriate. This requirement guarantees the validity and academic credibility of all sources utilized. The review requirement restricts publications or journals used to those published within the last ten years to ensure significance and novelty. However, publications older than ten years were sparingly utilized only where they were deemed to have substantial value for the study.

The data search strategy for the study necessitated that the literature was obtained from recognized academic databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. The search procedure consists of the use of carefully selected key-words, such as “public trust in government” “public trust and compliance with government policies”, “public trust and compliance with government regulations in public health emergencies”, “public distrust in government in Nigeria”, and “low compliance with government policy measures in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic”. The search procedure was carefully documented to assure validity and transparency. Journals and articles and other academic materials identified underwent screening based on research title, abstract, and full-text review to streamline eligibility.

A combination of the qualitative content analysis and thematic techniques were employed to carry out the systematic review and unbiased analysis of the data collected. The qualitative content analysis is a method of systematic, rule-guided qualitative data analysis, which attempts

to uphold certain methodological strengths of quantitative content analysis and broaden them to an idea of qualitative procedure (Mayring, 2000), while thematic analysis is a technique for analysing qualitative data that involves searching across a data set for the purpose of identifying, analysing, and reporting recurrent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These methods facilitated methodical reading, discovery, critical thinking, dissection of ideas, and extrication of pertinent information from the contents of the academic materials. Themes were derived through careful identification of meaningful and regular patterns that concentrate on the topical issue of the study, aided by familiarization with data, overriding themes, and refinement of such themes. The validation of the themes is grounded in the study's selection of articles recently published in peer reviewed journals, whose findings reflect contemporary developments about public trust in government and public health authorities and adherence to safety policy measures during public health crisis in general, and with particular reference to the coronavirus epidemic.

5. What are the Pre-Existing Undercurrents for Public Distrust and Low Compliance with Government's COVID-19 Containment Policy Measures in Nigeria?

The crux of the argument of this paper is that the show of distrust in the government and its health authorities by most Nigerians, and their refusal to adhere to the authorized COVID-19 safety measures, was necessarily not directly connected with the public health crisis occasioned by the novel coronavirus itself. Rather, this undesirable attitude by Nigerians was triggered mainly by real governance problems predating the pandemic. Specifically, the incident is traceable to the ills that have characterized the governance and politics systems of the country for the most part of its post-independence history, which have created a somewhat condition of “permanent citizens’ distrust” in the government and disregard for its formal regulations. This study identifies and analyses the most prominent of these factors along appropriate themes, below.

5.1. Experiences with Government's Management of Previous Nationwide Emergencies

Nigerians' experiences with the government during the country's response to past nationwide threats inevitably influenced their disposition towards the government amidst the COVID-19 epidemic. The occurrence of, and response to previous national humanitarian crises had provided individuals in government in Nigeria, alongside the officials of relevant public institutions with the incentives for corrupt behaviours, in particular, stealing of public monies, and thus betraying public trust in the government and its agencies. Duri (2021) observes that “humanitarian and economic crises create the perfect storm for corruption to thrive due to the huge influx of financial aid and the need for emergency procurement and disbursement of funds

to mitigate the crisis – with minimal oversight”. The experience in Nigeria as pertaining to the fight against the Boko Haram insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria can serve as a relatively most recent typical example.

It was only in 2015 that Nigerians knew that the bulk of the monies, almost \$2 billion, meant to be channelled to executing the war against insurgency in the troubled North-East region of the country was diverted into the personal purses of a handful of persons. This happened regardless of the authoritative guarantees that the government had given to Nigerians that it was resolute to decimating Boko Haram and that the terrorist syndicate was soon going to be part of history (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). In the run-up to the Nigerian 2015 presidential election that produced President Muhammadu Buhari as President, he had stated clearly during his campaigns that his administration would, among other things, bring the Boko Haram’s orchestrated insecurity in the North-Eastern region to a quick halt. According to Smith (2015), Buhari’s antecedent as experienced former military personnel was seen by Nigerians as an advantage in the campaign against Boko Haram’s terrorism. In December 2015, six months from the time that President Buhari assumed office, he announced that the Nigerian security forces had technically conquered Boko Haram, and stated with all assurances that the people displaced by the conflict could begin to return to their homes to enable them live normal life. Yet, on a daily basis, the Boko Haram terrorists continued to launch attacks, resulting in significant losses of human lives. Amidst this, the group’s leadership released videos showcasing their increasing capacity to carry on with the fight, which negated Nigerian government’s pronouncements and assurances. In actuality, community players have since that time continuously refuted the assertions by the government that the Boko Haram terrorists are not controlling any geographic areas within Nigeria, insisting that scores of local governments are being controlled by the group, hence provoking doubts regarding the situation in the affected region comparatively to the government’s explanation (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). In another scenario, the management of the Social Investment Programmes by the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development has aroused doubts and protests over the credibility of the scheme. The ministry has also neglected persistent requests for it to publicly disclose the details of the disbursement of food and conditional cash transfers, and this concern is well-founded in consonance with the tenets of openness and accountability in the use of public resources (Christopher, 2020).

In as much as Nigerians’ display of scepticism towards the threat of COVID-19 was a high risk on its own, they, therefore, have obvious reasons to entertain doubts concerning the way the

Nigerian government responded to the pandemic, drawing from the experiences of the management of past national emergencies in the country (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). These past experiences, coupled with the recent experience of display of untrustworthiness by the government and its health institutions during the COVID-19 crisis would, no doubts, continue to negatively influence public trust and compliance with government measures in the times of any future nationwide threats. Recall, for example, that when COVID-19 newly broke-out in the city of Wuhan in China, the then Minister of Health in Nigeria claimed publicly that an isolation centre had already been established in a public health facility in Abuja. Nonetheless, when some members of the Senate embarked on an inspection tour of the facility, nothing of such was found existing, just as it was also revealed that no money had been provided for the execution of the project. And this contributed to creating doubts on the minds of the citizens concerning whether the healthcare complexes in Nigeria that have been in a dilapidated condition, had the capability to manage an outburst of the coronavirus in the country (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). Thus, false claims by Nigerian health authorities during the pandemic also contributed in triggering citizens' distrust and the low-level of adherence to government's specified safety mechanisms.

5.2. Syndrome of Bad, Irresponsible, and Irresponsive Political Leadership

Nigerian citizens have not had a taste of good, responsible, and responsive political leadership since the inception of the country. This was the very substance of the message conveyed by Chinua Achebe in his 1983 seminal work, "The Trouble with Nigeria", where he unambiguously stated in the opening sentence that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (Achebe, 1983). He explains further that Nigeria has no problems with respect to its nature, weather or environmental characteristics, but that the major cog in the wheels of progress and development of Nigeria is the absence of good and responsible leadership (Achebe, 1983). Achebe made this observation about Nigeria more than three decades ago, and the leadership problem persists in the country till today. Successive Nigerian political leaders under military and civilian regimes have hitherto proven to be self-serving leaders, who are not motivated by a genuine sense of service to the nation and its population. Rather, they are driven by the desire to use public offices to pursue the actualization of their personal material desires. Embellishing this verity, Kasali (2020) states that the motive of political leaders to contest for a position in government varies and influences the type of policy actions and programmes approved and executed when they assume office. Specifically, the

excessive avenues for rent-seeking in government office in Nigeria have consistently enticed politicians who primarily aim to extract rents (Kasali, 2020).

Bereft of a public service focus, therefore, the crop of political leaders in Nigeria do not pay attention to the yearnings of the common people, but are more oriented towards rent-seeking, and do not also possess the requisite skills and competence for quality leadership. For Anekwe (2020), this explains why previous and current leaders in Nigeria have woefully failed to offer good and proficient leadership that would help to ameliorate a myriad of problems facing the country. Since the return to civil-democratic rule in 1999, Nigerians are yet to begin to enjoy the expected dividends of democracy, just as developments in all ramifications have continuously eluded the country due to bad leadership (Nwosu & Asiegbu, 2023). With decades in this quagmire of bad, irresponsible, and unresponsive leadership, without any signs of the possibility of positive changes in the near future, ordinary Nigerians are inevitably wearied and disappointed in their political leaders. They commonly believe that the political class would never act or genuinely pursue any policy agenda in their collective interest, hence they regularly express their frustration and disappointment in the government through manifest distrust and disregard for its rules.

5.3. Endemic Political Corruption and Impunity

There is, in Nigeria, the phenomenon of endemic corruption and impunity among the country's political leaders at all levels, which has robbed Nigerians the rightful privileges of citizenship. This is the main reason that Nigeria constantly ranks high in the Corruption Perception Index, but ranks so poorly in the Human Development Index (HDI), indicating that the rife corruption leads to less commitment and contribution to the good of the country's citizens (ActionAid Nigeria, 2015). Undisputedly, massive government corruption has been on the increase up to the point of impunity in last two decades, making the country to be ranked as the most corrupt globally (ActionAid Nigeria, 2015). Revealing the disturbing incidence of government corruption in Nigeria, a recent survey shows that as much as 72% of Nigerians strongly believe that the country's political leaders have remained highly corrupt and selfish (Popoola, 2021). Nigerian leaders are mostly opportunistic individuals who see their positions in government as a means of accumulating riches corruptly regardless of the detrimental consequences for the larger society, and they do everything possible to retain political power, so as to continue to enjoy the undue privileges.

Public financial resources are commonly misappropriated in Nigeria by individuals and institutions controlling government apparatus and are saddled with the responsibility for managing the resources for welfare and development purposes, including the state governors, ministers, legislators, and ministries, departments and agencies at all levels of government. Money laundering has remained a primary way by which stolen public monies from Nigeria are secretly hauled out to other countries (ActionAid Nigeria, 2015). Anti-corruption campaigns have produced less satisfactory result despite that successful government have made them very popular and admirable. This arises from the constant intersection of institutional deficiency and political underpinnings, which permit corrupt players to thrive. The absence of muscular governance structures, and the pervasive effect of political interconnection impedes on the anti-corruption activity and the effort at increasing transparency in the conduct of government business. As a result, the country's national anti-corruption institutions, namely the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), are reduced to mere formalistic and political tool at the disposal of the ruling party for silencing political opponents indicted for corruption (Bakare, 2024). Public officials are also shielded from being investigated for corruption charges on political or inter-personal relationship grounds, and this makes the situation worst (ActionAid Nigeria, 2015). The intended instrumental value of the anti-graft agencies is thus rendered futile, bringing the rationale for their continued existence to question.

Even under the immediate past President Muhammadu Buhari-led administration (2015-2023), for example, with its lauded mantra of “zero-tolerance for corruption” the EFCC shied away from unearthing frauds and prosecuting prominent cases of expropriation of public funds in which past and present government officials were implicated. Noteworthy among these, for example, was the case of the N37.1 billion allegedly laundered by officials of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development under the headship of erstwhile Minister, Mrs Sadiya Umar-Farouk during the Buhari administration (Agbo, 2024; Sanusi et al., 2023). It was discovered that from 2018 to 2023, the sum of N37.1 billion, to be precise, N37,170,855,753.44 (\$23,351,512) was transmitted from the treasury of the Nigerian Federal Government to the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster management and Social Development for the children school feeding programme, but was allegedly laundered by the officials of the said ministry. Investigation by the EFCC revealed that this huge sum was sent into 38 distinct accounts housed in five various commercial banks in Nigeria. These bank accounts are said to belong to or linked with a contractor, James Okwete. Okwete allegedly

transmitted N6,746,034,000.00 (\$4,238,000) to Bureau De Change Operators, withdrew cash of N540,000,000.00 (\$339,239), used N288,348,600.00 (\$181,147) to buy cars, and expended N2,192,115,000.00 (\$1,379,017) in acquiring valuable properties in Abuja and Enugu State (Sanusi et al., 2023; Obarayese, 2024).

As usual, the Minister, Sadiya Umar-Farouk (an appointee of President Buhari), under whose watch this enormous fraud took place hastily denied having any connections with the arrested contractor (Suleiman, 2023). She was, however, only invited and interrogated for 12 hours by the EFCC, and then released on bail (Obarayese, 2024). Today, she walks freely. Failure by the Nigerian government led by former President Buhari to prosecute the culprits in this case, as well as those allegedly involved in other famous corruption offences during his tenure indicates the administration's inability and deficit of political will and sincerity in fighting corruption (Bakare, 2024). This highlights the basis of the argument of a lot of Nigerians, including human rights activists, eminent public affairs analysts, civil society groups, professional bodies, and political opponents that the Buhari-led administration's anti-graft war was extremely selective. They observed that President Buhari's close allies, who were ostensibly implicated in several corruption offences were spared, while his political opponents were targeted by the EFCC (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). It remains an irony that President Buhari, who was voted into office to fight corruption ended up using the anti-corruption apparatuses to witch-hunt political opponents. Clearly, political considerations and interpersonal relationships not only promote corruption and impunity among Nigerian political leaders, but also seriously weakens the often-celebrated war against corruption in the country. With unbridled colossal corruption thriving alongside impunity, Nigerians consider the successive governments in the country as merely paying lip service to the fight against governmental corruption. As such, the state of citizens' distrust in government, as well as low regard for its regulations remains deplorable in Nigeria.

5.4. Long-time Experiences of failed Governments' Promises

Nigerians have had accumulated experiences of unfulfilled promises made to them by the consecutive governments in the country. Political parties in Nigeria and their candidates are known by the electorate for making lofty promises during electioneering campaigns to garner the people's support and votes, but always renege on their promises while in office, after winning elections on the support of the masses. This situation has persisted in Nigeria over the decades, and has immensely furthered the steady decline of public trust in the government. As Onapajo & Adebisi (2020) affirm, Nigerians widely mistrust their government due to many years of disappointments, unfulfilled campaign vows, unaccomplished government agendas,

mammoth corruption and inability to bring to fruition the benefits of democracy. In a 2016 Afrobarometer survey, which aimed to gauge the degree of trust that the citizens have for their governments across 36 countries in Africa, Nigeria earned the lowest score with just an insignificant percentage of her population demonstrating favourable dispositions to the government. The World Economic Forum (WEF) also established in 2018, that Nigeria took the 130th position out of 137 countries examined for citizens' distrust of government officials (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). Succeeding administrations in Nigeria are culpable in perpetuating the unwholesome act of deliberately failing to deliver on their campaign promises to the Nigerian electorate, as well as the pervading monumental corruption that spurs public distrust and discontentment about the government.

Before being sworn in as Nigeria's President following his victory against former President Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election, retired General Muhammadu Buhari was one person in the Nigerian political class whose personal integrity and credibility was widely attested to, both within and outside the country. As such, Nigerians believed with high hopes that the era of "promise and fail" by the politicians and political parties would come to an end, if Buhari, who bore the presidential flag of the APC in the election, was elected to replace the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan in office as the President of Nigeria. Smith (2015) reiterates that many Nigerians that were wearied of the numerous corruption scandals during the Jonathan-led administration alluded that the strictness of Buhari was what Nigeria needed. Buhari's personal pedigree created this euphoria, and he himself severally assured Nigerians that his administration would salvage the country from the numerous problems facing it, especially corruption and bad governance. As Lawal (2022) recalls, Buhari regularly echoed the phrase "if we do not kill corruption, corruption will kill Nigeria", which later served as the certified motto of his election campaign that anchored on the three basic pillars, namely economy, security, and corruption. Eager to have their country rescued from the scourge of corruption and impunity committed during the 16 years (1999-2015) that the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) held political power and governed at the federal level, and controlled majority of the states in Nigeria, Nigerians voted for Buhari en mass, culminating into his victory in the 2015 election.

Onapajo & Adebisi (2020) corroborate that in the centre of President Buhari's campaign promises to Nigerians was the assurance that his government would "kill corruption before it kills Nigeria", which prompted Nigerians to rejoice and vote for him in 2015. The Nigerian masses expressed trust in Buhari owing to his conservative manner of living. Also, during his

era as a Head of State, Nigerians saw him introduce severe measures to reduce corruption to its barest minimum in the 1980s. But in spite of that, Buhari's years in office as the President of Nigeria under the present democratic arrangement saw a reversal in this case as corruption flourished normally (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). Buhari served two terms (2015-2023) in office as the President of Nigeria, but was unable to fulfil even his most important promise to Nigerians, that is, nipping corruption in the bud. With this, since the end of his administration, the hope of Nigerians for the possibility of actualizing of the dream of a corruption-free Nigeria have been dashed completely. The common question that has continued to resonate on the minds of Nigerians is: Since Buhari could not rid Nigeria of corruption, who else can?

Beyond "killing corruption", as part of his economic revitalization agenda, President Buhari also promised to rebuild the four state-owned refineries in Nigeria located in Port-Harcourt, Warri, and Kaduna to optimal capacity to boost foreign reserves and reduce the country's reliance on imported refined petroleum products. Up till the time of completion of this study, however, the four refineries remained in their dysfunctional state and Nigeria has not ceased to import virtually all its petroleum products from abroad (Mojeed, 2022; Sunday *et al.*, 2021). Admitting this, the country's past Minister of Petroleum Resources, Ibe Kachikwu, who was appointed in 2015 said in an interview that he was not ashamed to accept that the Buhari-led government failed to provide refineries to Nigerians as he did promise in the build-up to the 2015 presidential election (Sahara Reporters, 2019). The result is that the government has continued to import petrol at exorbitant cost for daily use of the citizens. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) shows that Nigeria is spending almost N3 trillion every year on importation of refined petrol (Sunday *et al.*, 2021). The effect of this high cost of imported petroleum products are inevitably borne by ordinary Nigerians who have to buy these products derived from the crude oil found and produced in their country at lamentable high prices, which has kept the cost of living so high and created a general condition of untold hardship among the citizens.

To make the situation worse, Nigerians are experiencing what many have described as the highest level of hardship in the history of the country under the current administration of Buhari's successor, the incumbent President Bola Tinubu of APC. This is despite Tinubu's promise during his presidential election campaign that his "Renewed Hope Agenda", which was erected on an eight-point plan that constituted his social contract with Nigerians – food security, poverty alleviation, economic growth, job creation, access to capital, inclusion, among others, would offer Nigerians an escape route from economic hardship (Igwe, 2024; Ewang,

2024; Akpan, 2024). As always, Tinubu has failed Nigerians as his economic policies have, within his first year in office, exacerbated the already socio-economic vulnerability of ordinary citizens who have been weeping and wailing due to widespread poverty, hunger, and frustration presently ravaging millions of households under his administration (Igwe, 2024; Ewang, 2024). The leader of the Labour Party's (LP) caucus in the House of Representatives at the Nigerian National Assembly, Afam Ogene, describes President Tinubu's first year in Office as a "reign of economic hardship and failed promises" (Akpan, 2024, para. 1). On Monday, 29 May 2023, the day Bola Tinubu was sworn in as Nigeria's President, the anticipated "Renewer of Hope" hurriedly made a policy statement during his inaugural speech that directly contradicted the "renewed hope" promise he made to Nigerians, which was the main mantra of his campaign. In the speech, President Tinubu declared to Nigerians while standing on the podium that his government was removing the subsidy on fuel consumption, and he made the announcement without having put any measures in place to cushion the likely effects of this hasty policy on the populace (Ewang, 2024).

Together with other economic decisions, the removal of fuel subsidy by Tinubu's government has aggravated the cost-of-living problem in Nigeria in nearly 30 years, plunging millions of the citizens into greater levels of poverty (Ewang, 2024). The Labour Party's law-makers in the House of Representatives affirm that the increased insecurity and economic hardship in Nigeria apparently contradict the renewed hope agenda that Tinubu pledged to Nigerians during his campaign (Akpan, 2024). It was this general economic hardship and frustration that prompted the recent 10 days nationwide #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria protest that lasted from August 1 to August 11, 2024, in which Nigerians trooped to the streets across the major cities in the country to draw the attention of the Tinubu-led government to their sufferings, while demanding for an end to bad governance in the country (Abubakar & Obiejesi, 2024). The protest, however, never achieved the desired results as Tinubu's government remains adamant on not reversing its economic policies that have inflicted severe hardship on the populace. The above examples explain why succeeding governments in Nigeria have been notorious for persistently failing on their campaign promises, a state of affairs that continues to reinforce public distrust and non-compliance with government regulatory policies.

5.5. Masses' Alienation from the Nation's Natural Resource Wealth and Acute Poverty

Nigeria is endowed with abundance of natural resources, but the benefits of the country's huge natural resource revenues are enjoyed only by the members of the political class, while the ordinary citizens remain completely left out, causing them to groan in acute poverty. Besides

the numerous solid mineral resources available in commercial quantities in different parts of the country, Nigeria's economy depends basically on oil and gas, which account for more than 95 per cent of its incomes from foreign trade, 25 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and around 90 per cent of the government's revenue (Olayungbo, 2019). Nigeria is the largest oil producing country in Africa and the sixth biggest exporter globally (Elwerfelli & Benhin, 2018), with production capacity of 2.2 million barrels per day in 2011 (Natural Resource Governance Institute [NRGI], 2016). The country is known to possess the tenth biggest verified oil reservoirs in the world, and the second in Africa after Libya, with confirmed oil pool as of 2015 put at 37.14 billion barrels (Elwerfelli & Benhin, 2018). Nigeria is also widely recognized as the largest economy in Africa, possessing a GDP put at \$477.38 billion in 2023 (Michael, 2023). Despite this, however, the United Nations (UN) HDI of 2022 ranked Nigeria among the world's poorest countries, since the country was positioned at 161 out of 193 countries assessed (Bailey, 2022). Unsurprisingly, Nigeria is considered as a country of paradox for being richly endowed with abundance of natural resources, but the vast majority of its population of over two hundred million people (precisely 233,678, 642 as of September 15, 2024, stemming from Worldometer's explanation of the newest UN data) (Worldometer, 2024), are living in deep poverty and extreme hardship.

The Nigerian Federal Government itself also confirms this fact via the NBS, which unveiled the outcome of its 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey, revealing that 63 per cent of Nigerians (133 million people) are poor in a multidimensional sense (NBS, 2022). This is a major outcome of the long period of the elite's denial of the masses of Nigeria their rightful privilege to have a fair share of the nation's oil and gas fortunes, through the availability of gainful employments, provision of basic infrastructures for socio-economic development, as well as essential public services obtainable at subsidized rates. This situation epitomizes the "resource curse" phenomenon described by scholars as a circumstance where publicly owned assets that ought to engender wealth, stability and well-being triggers corruption and creates mass poverty; in Nigeria, oil is the cause of this (Mohammed, 2021). This deprivation brought about by the well-entrenched bad governance culture that subsists in Nigeria has a human cost, which is discernible in the inadequacy of necessary infrastructure, deficient healthcare and educational systems, towering rates of joblessness, and the large numbers of out-of-school children, to mention a few. The 2021 #EndSARS protests held by the youth in Nigeria was not only targeted at ending police brutality and human rights abuses, but also indicated increased dissatisfaction among the youth about the government (Kasali, 2020). The Nigerian youth that

are often referred to as “future leaders” are disgruntled at the way those in government flaunt their mostly ill-gotten wealth, while the majority of them are economically marginalized; even, most of the youth that attended tertiary institutions still roam about the streets in search of job after many years of graduation.

The elite in Nigeria capture the State and control political power, which provides them unrestricted access to managing the oil revenues of the country, and they do not allow the resources to circulate in such a way that the common citizens would equally benefit from them. Ordinary Nigerians that constitute the majority of the country’s population wallow in abject poverty, while they watch a few individuals live extremely opulent and extravagant life-styles, together with their children, family members, friends, and political associates. The elite maintains these wasteful life-styles with collectively owned resources, mainly from the nation’s oil and gas revenues, which they use their positions in government to amass at the expense of the rest of the citizens. This entrenched culture of deprivation has, for so long, fostered a strong feeling of animosity within the citizenry, especially the youth, who, according to Mohammed (2021), largely see the Nigerian government as having failed them. Agreeably, Kasali (2020) substantiates that the poor socio-economic attainments of Nigeria, corruption, deep poverty, want of trust in the political system, among other things, have resulted in disillusionment among the citizens, particularly the youth that form 15 per cent of the country’s 84 million certified voters. This is consequential considering that the more than 200 million population of Nigeria is made up of over 60 per cent of people below 25 years of age (Kasali, 2020). With this, it is expected that an increased level of public distrust and disregard for government policies would inevitable be the main defining factors in the relationship between the Nigerian government and the citizens, both now and in the future, except some drastic and deliberate actions are taken to counteract the trend.

6. What Measures could be taken to solve the Problem?

The declined level of citizens’ trust in the government robs Nigeria of the people’s valuable contributions to addressing the country’ critical present and future challenges, inclusive of public health emergencies, such as the recent global COVID-19 pandemic, which would necessarily require the active cooperation of the public with the government to contain. This warrants that appropriate measures be taken by some relevant critical stakeholders in the Nigeria project to attain an increased level of public trust in the government to guarantee the people’s support and cooperation with the government whenever required. Accordingly, this

paper presents a set of recommendations, but which are specifically tied to the underlying issues identified in the study as being responsible for the manifest lack of trust in the Nigerian government and low-level of compliance with its COVID-19 containment policy measures amid the pandemic, below.

The Nigerian Federal Governments needs to prove to the people, beyond reasonable doubts, that it was driven by a sincere sense of commitment and genuine purpose to fight the previous emergencies that had allegedly provided opportunities for corruption by the agencies of government that managed the response activities. Precisely, the government should investigate all alleged cases of corruption in all past nationwide humanitarian crises, including the just gone COVID-19 pandemic, where huge sums were purportedly mismanaged by relevant government health authorities to prosecute and punish the offenders according to the law. This will serve as deterrence to corruption in emergency management in the country, as well as help to exonerate the government itself from the accusations of being involved in the corrupt practices allegedly committed by its agencies at those times. By so doing, the government will increase its chances of regaining a high-level of the citizens' trust in it, and an improved level of compliance with its recommended policies in any future national emergencies.

The Nigerian electorate, henceforth, must be extremely careful in selecting political leaders across all levels of government – federal, state, and local governments. They must focus attention on electing credible people, who will offer quality leadership and be committed to advancing public interest, rather than seeking their personal interests. This requires that the electorate should be intentional about using their voting power to vote out of office any leaders and/or parties that have failed to provide good and quality leadership that the masses have yearned for, over the years. This conscious attempt should begin with the forthcoming 2027 general elections. To achieve this, the electorate must jettison all ethnic, religious, and political sentiments that have usually divided and propelled them to vote the wrong people into leadership positions in the past elections.

Anti-corruption and transparency/accountability-based civil society organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria need to brace up and begin to keep the government and the principal anti-graft agencies – EFCC and ICPC on their toes, by publicly mounting pressures on them to investigate, prosecute, and subject corrupt government officials, irrespective of who they are, to appropriate punishments as stipulated in the law. Since successive governments in Nigeria are fanatical about shielding certain individuals of interest to them from being investigated and prosecuted

for corruption charges, constant outcries by CSOs will help to force the government and the anti-corruption institutions to act within the law. CSOs' actions will also help to keep Nigerians abreast with developments as regards corruption scandals in the country, making it difficult to have them swept under the carpet, thereby reducing the syndrome of impunity to the barest minimum. To aid this, the CSOs should advocate for the National Assembly to amend section 308 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that protects incumbent political office-holders from being prosecuted to make it possible for any officials alleged of corruption to be tried at any time, rather than waiting until their tenure of office elapses. If done, Nigerians will regard this as the greatest achievement the CSOs would record in the fight against corruption in the country. Likewise, the performance of the demand of the CSOs by the Legislature and the Executive arm of government by expunging the much talked-about section 308 from the constitution will invariably boost public confidence in the government and adherence to its regulatory measures, since Nigerians will see the action as an indication of government's determination to nip political corruption in the bud in the country.

Nigerian politicians/parties and the governments they form must urgently take conscious steps to reverse on their "promise and failed" campaign strategy, which has severed their relationship with the electorate. President Tinubu, who is current in power should take the lead in this regard by fulfilling all the promises he made to Nigerians during his campaign, based on his "Renewed Hope Agenda", especially those touching on the economy. Having promised Nigerians better economic conditions under his administration, President Tinubu should reverse his harsh economic policies, particularly the policy on fuel subsidy removal, which has inflicted an unusual level of hardship and suffering on millions of the citizenry. This will signify that governments in Nigeria are beginning to be responsive to the yearnings of the people, especially when considered from the standpoint of Nigerians' demand during the recent 10-day nationwide #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria protest.

Nigerian political elite should deliberately cause the nation's oil and gas wealth to circulate, such that everyone benefits from it through the creation of job opportunities, meaningful poverty alleviation programmes, provision of basic infrastructures and essential public services at subsidized rates. This will reduce the poverty rates in the country drastically, improve living standards among the citizens, and unfailingly create in them a sense of belonging to the Nigerian state, which is a necessary ingredient for catalysing a high level of public trust in the government and compliance with its prescribed policies for any purposes.

7. Conclusion

Nigeria recorded its first case of the COVID-19 infection in February 2020. With this, the Nigerian government swiftly introduced various policy strategies to prevent the spread of the disease in the country. Measures introduced included restriction on international travels from and to the country, restriction on inter-state travels, social distancing, banning of mass gatherings, closure of schools, to mention a few. The establishment of these containment measures indicated that Nigeria had realized that it had come face-to-face with the reality of COVID-19, and that the citizens' compliance with them was of high imperative to enable the country stop the disease from spreading further in the country. However, the majority of Nigerians received the news of the outbreak and existence of the coronavirus in the country with apparent scepticisms, leading to the spread of misinformation and unsubstantiated beliefs among the population regarding the virus. Among the notions held by most Nigerians was that those in government only wanted to use COVID-19 as a ploy to steal public money, and thus doubted that the disease existed in the country. Therefore, most Nigerian citizens distrusted the government as regards COVID-19, and consequently, there was a low-level of compliance with the formal protocols for its prevention, which had a negative impact on the country's effort to contain the virus.

The refusal by the majority of Nigerians to adhere to the government's prescribed preventive regulations for the coronavirus resulted in increased numbers of cases of the infection in almost all the states in the country, including Abuja, the capital territory. As the study has argued and proven, the demonstration of distrust in the Nigerian government and low compliance with its set COVID-19 containment policies by the citizens did not arise from the pandemic milieu, but was instead the consequence of many long-existing key governance challenges in the country. As identified and analysed in the study, notable among these are: experiences with the government's management of past national emergencies; the problem of bad, irresponsible, and irresponsive political leadership; widespread governmental corruption and impunity, many years of experiences of governments' failure to fulfil promises made to the citizens during electioneering campaigns, and alienation of the population from the nation's natural resource fortunes, which has created a general condition of acute poverty in the country. With these exigent governance situations unaddressed for a long period of time, the Nigerian government will likely continue to experience difficulties in securing appreciable levels of the citizens' trust and compliance with its policies at any given time and in any situations. Nevertheless, if the

recommendations of this study are fully embraced and carefully implemented, it is certain that there will be a positive reverse in the trend.

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