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CRIMINAL JUSTICE UNDER OBASANJO'S REGIME IN
NIGERIA (2003-2007): AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to theoretically discuss and assess the criminal justice in Nigeria from 2003 to 2007 during Obasanjo's second term as a civilian president in Nigeria. The paper used control theory to review the role of the criminal justice in Nigeria. The paper pointed out that, despite the huge financial and human resources that were made available to the organs charged with the duty of enforcing law and order in Nigeria, the performance of the Nigeria police force, courts and prisons in Nigeria were far below public expectation during the period under review. The paper further explained that the main aim or goals of the criminal justice in Nigeria, among others, is to ensure enforcement of laws, peace and order punishment, correction and rehabilitation of offenders etc. However, or contrary to their established roles, the police, courts, and prisons were often accused of engaging in extra-judicial killings, failure to unravel and charge to courts many cases of politically motivated killings among others. The paper further pointed out that courts in Nigeria were often accused of deliberately delaying justice while the prisons were places of hardening criminals instead of being a place of correction and rehabilitation. The paper concluded and recommended that for better performance, the judiciary should be made independent indeed and not seen and treated as an appendage of the executive arm of the government among other recommendations.

Introduction

Crime is a worldwide social phenomenon that has bedeviled the entire continents of the world like a holocaust. The incidence of crime and

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its negative effects worldwide is so devastating such that scholars from the field of criminology, sociology, and psychology among other disciplines are devoting their attention to crime research. The major concern of sociologists and criminologists is to conduct research on how crime rate can be reduced if not completely eliminated from all human societies.

According to Haralambos and Horlomb¹, functionalism was the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology during the 1940s and 1950s, and it is concerned with explaining the origin and maintenance of order and stability in society. To the functionalist, the occurrence of crime in any society contributes positively to the development of criminal laws and criminal justice in general.

According to Parson,² Durkheim³ and Merton, the occurrence or incidence of crime in any society is a pointer to the weakness of criminal justice. Incidence of crime also acts as a clarion call for the review and enactment of criminal law with the view to strengthening it and making it more proactive. Thus, to the functionalists, crime contributes to peace, order and stability of the society. This is so, because, the incidence of crime will force the ruling class to come up with punitive laws that will sanction violators of criminal laws.

On the other hand, proponents of conflict school of thought or theory posit that conflict and crime are inevitable in all human societies. According to Marx (cited in Bottomire),⁴ conflict and crime are the engine that drives the society on the wheel of progress. The conflict theoreticians are of the view that the incidence of crime in any society is as a result of inequality injustice, segregation, oppression and widening gap between the rich and the poor among other factors. Marx is of the view that crime cannot be wiped out of human society as long as the problem of inequality and oppression is not addressed. He further states that incidence of any type of crime is often a reaction or response to existing societal ills. No wonder, all human societies, both Ancient and Modern, developed or underdeveloped, are devoting huge financial and human resources to fight the upsurge of crime.

Nigeria as a nation has her own share of crime rate. When Obasanjo came to power as civilian president in May 1999, with particular emphasis during his second term in office (2003-2007), he committed enormous financial and human resources to reduce crime rate in the country. The Nigerian national budget under Obasanjo (in the period under review) showed the Ministry of Defence with, the highest

budgetary allocation. This is to show the importance that Obasanjo's administration accorded security.

One of the ways that Obasanjo's administration tackled and waged war against crime was the continuous development of the nation's criminal justice. In Nigeria, just like every developing or modern society, there are ways of apprehension, trial and correction of criminals who break or deviate from the laws of the land. The process involved is referred to as criminal justice. Some of the contributions of Obasanjo's administration to the development of criminal justice in Nigeria can be seen from the government efforts and that of the agencies charged with the duties of law maintenance and order, dispensing and ensuring justice, punishing and reforming those who breached the law of the land. To ensure equity, peace, justice and order in Nigeria, Obasanjo's administration relied on the Nigeria Police Force, courts and prisons for the full implementation of the criminal justice in Nigeria.

This chapter will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

- (a) The concept of crime and criminal justice;
- (b) Origin of criminal justice in Nigeria;
- (c) Theoretical explanation of criminal justice in Nigeria;
- (d) The role of criminal justice in Nigeria;
- (e) The assessment of criminal justice in Nigeria; and conclusion and recommendation.

The Concept of Crime and Criminal Justice

The concept of crime can be defined from different angles. According to Igbo,⁵ crime as a social phenomenon has caught the attention of scholars from different academic disciplines such as sociologists, philosophers and psychologists alike. The concept of crime can be described as a universal phenomenon. The only difference is its relativity in nature. That is, what constitute crime in a particular environment or society may not be a crime in another society due to cultural diversity. Commission, which by law renders the person responsible and liable to punishment by fine or imprisonment in special proceedings is normally instituted by officers in the service of the crown.

According to Curzon (cited in Igbo), the term crime can be conceptualized as any deviant conduct or behaviour which is regarded as harmful or injurious and which the state wishes to prevent by exposing the offender to some kinds of punishment by the state via proceeding which

are always done on behalf of the state with the assistance of the police, courts and prisons.

Another concept of crime is by Wright⁶ who views crime as an offence against the laws of a particular country, which attracts punishment from the state. He further stated that the nature of punishment is usually determined by the judiciary in accordance with the laws and this is done with the cooperation of the police and the prison superstructures.

To Jacqueline,⁷ crime is defined as any conduct that is forbidden by the state and to which punishment has been attached. This is so because the state has regarded such conduct as being criminal.

According to Igbo, criminal justice an institution of social control which persuades people either through subtle or not so subtle means to abide by the dominant values of society. He further posits that the subtle means could be through gossips, songs and peer pressure, while the not so subtle means could be through expulsion, incarceration, etc.

From the above definitions, one can say that the main goal of criminal justice is persuasion which enables people to abide by limited range of social values which violation constitutes crime. This section will lead to the origin of criminal justice in Nigeria.

Origin of Criminal in Nigeria

The origin of Nigeria criminal justice can be traced to English law of the British because Nigeria was formally a British colony. According to Crowder⁸ in 1899, the charter granted to Royal Niger Company Limited to administer Nigeria was revoked, and the British Government took over direct administration of Nigeria by 1900. Before the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1900, the Royal Niger Company had already established courts of justice and armed constabulary to enforce laws and regulations.

According to Elias⁹, by 1874 ten courts were created with only four devoted to criminal matters. Elias further stated that all the laws enacted by the colonial legislative council were based on the law, values and customs of the English people.

By 1904, the criminal code was introduced to the protectorate of Northern Nigeria by Lord Lugard (Oloyede).¹⁰ According Arikpo, with the coming together of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, Lord Lugard made criminal code of 1904 applicable to all the protectorates in Nigeria with the exception of Northern Nigeria due to the Islamic law that was already being implemented by the Emirs. According to Nwabuse,

the colonial master had to introduce penal code that would take into account Moslem interest, values and standards.

Furthermore, the relationship between criminal code and penal code under the British Colonial rule in Nigeria among others included the fact that both criminal and panel codes were different laws used by the colonial masters to govern Nigeria. Whereas, the criminal code was used mainly in the Southern Nigeria, the panel code was used to govern the Northern states protectorate of British colony.

In present day Nigeria, there is tripartite system of criminal law and justice. First is the criminal code based on English law and legal practice. Arikpo¹¹. The penal code is based on Maliki and Muslim system of justice and is enforced in the Northern Nigeria while the customary law is based on the customs and traditions of the people in Southern Nigeria.

Theoretical Explanation for Criminal Justice in Nigeria

The main theory that this paper relies on to assess the criminal justice in Nigeria is control theory by Robertson¹². According to him, a theoretical approach to the study of crime is the control theory. This particular theory is quite different from other criminal or expatriates or deviation theories like the different association theory.

Deviation theories attempt to explain or offer an explanation to why some members of a particular society will not want to conform to the norms, customs, laws and standard approved pattern of behaviour acceptable in such society. The control theory assumes that life is characterized by temptations and that deviant acts tend to be attractive providing rewards to those who engage in them.

The theory posits that it is only when society is able to control people's behaviour that they can conform to norms and laws. According to the theory, if there is no such law to control behaviour there might be little conformity.

The theory further postulates that people who are integrated into the community tend to follow its rules, whereas, people who are isolated from the community may be inclined to break the rules.

It also emphasizes the importance of control measure that will check the implementation of the law that governs people's behaviour and conduct. The theory maintains that, the moment laws that guide people's behaviour are weak and no adequate control measure is in place to enforce adherence to such law, the tendency for people to break such law is very high.

The implication of this theory for this study is that people will indulge in crime if what they would gain in the process is more than what they will gain by abstinence from crime. This theory is relevant to the study of criminal justice; it emphasises social control. Any society where there is no organization that can enforce law and order will face the problem of disorder and violation of the law.

In spite of the usefulness of this theory to this study, there are some notable pitfalls in the theory. The theory emphasizes lack of social control that leads to deviance in society. There are several instances where there are social control systems, in form of laws, norms, prohibition acts that guide deviant acts in society. But still people break such laws to commit deviant acts. For instance, the Nigerian Police as agent of criminal justice in Nigeria often breach the law by extorting money from innocent citizens and charging innocent citizens to courts.

The Role of Criminal Justice in Nigeria

For one to adequately assess the criminal justice in Nigeria, it is necessary to start with the review of the function of criminal justice. There are three organs that function to implement the criminal justice. These include the Nigeria Police Force, the courts and the prisons. The roles of these organs are discussed briefly below, starting with the Nigerian Police.

(i) The Nigeria Police Force

Advanced countries like United States of America, Britain, etc operate a decentralized police system. But in Nigeria, the police system is centralized with the federal government in total control of the police force.

According to Odekunle,¹³ the functions of the police are peacekeeping and order maintenance, crime fighting, community service, quasi-judicial function, status quo of establishment protection function and paramilitary function.

To Okonkwo and Nash,¹⁴ the police perform the role of prevention and detection of crime, the projection of law and order and the protection of lives and property. They assert further that the police force is also responsible for the enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged.

(ii) **The Nigerian Courts**

According to Igbo,¹⁵ government of every country set up crime control mechanism to maintain justice and fairness to all. In Nigeria judicial system, the role of the court is to arbitrate between the prosecutor and the accused. When the police charge anyone to court after carrying out investigation, it is now the role of the courts to find out if the person accused has any case to answer or not.

Examination and cross-examination is part of the finding process of the courts which are done before a magistrate or judge usually assisted by court prosecutors. The main aim of the court is to maintain domestic peace and this is achieved via impartial judgement between people or nations in disputes. Part of the role of courts is to listen to both criminal and civil matters and choose who to punish or set free.

(ii) **The Prisons**

For effective administration of criminal justice in Nigeria, the prisons complement the role of the police and the courts. It is the role of police to arrest while courts sentence convicts or offenders to serve terms of imprisonment in prison yard. This is to prove that without the prison the role of the criminal justice will be incomplete.

Prison represents an institution where accused persons or individual deemed to have committed offences by courts are incarcerated. The Nigeria prison is designed in such a way that it punishes offenders by deliberately inflicting pain on them to deter the convicts and other future offenders.

According to Abumire, the infliction of pain can produce benefits if offenders change from their criminal deeds as a result of the punishment. It is also the role of prisons to rehabilitate criminals. This is done via inculcating social or vocational skills in those that lack it with the aim of turning convicts into productive and normal citizens.

The Assessment of the Criminal Justice in Nigeria

Any attempt to assess the criminal justice in Nigeria is a direct call to assess the role of the Nigeria Police, the courts and the prisons in Nigeria. The Nigeria Police Force during the period under assessment were fortunate in terms of public funding from the Federal, State, Local Government and Non-governmental Organisations among other contributors to police funding. Police salary scale was reviewed upward, there was no delay in police promotion and recruitment into the force

became a monthly routine throughout the federation. The holy bible puts it: "to whom much is given, much is expected". The government and the general public expect so much from the Nigeria Police but in turn, got so little from the police in terms of performance.

According to Nwobu,¹⁶ nearly a century after its formation, the Nigeria Police Force still largely retains its colonial disposition as a punitive expeditionary force rather than the society-friendly law enforcement organ of government. He further observes that the police still handle the civil society with high handedness as if the citizens are a bunch of troublesome "natives" who should be brought to their knees. According to Nwobu, the police do not have respect for the dictum, which says that a suspect is innocent until proved guilty. He concludes that no wonder, in spite of their spirited efforts, police image makers have so far failed to convince the public that the police are their friends.

The above assertion was the picture of the Nigeria Police Force during Obasanjo's first tenure as a civilian president in Nigeria. One expected that the image of the police should have improved by 2003, which was the commencement of his second tenure in office. Rather, by 2007, when Obasanjo was leaving office the image of the Nigeria police and their effectiveness have nose-dived.

Instead of the Nigeria police devoting its energy to combating and preventing crime, public brutality, violence and corruption became its "stock in trade". The police were noted for extra-judicial murder, extortion of money at police checkpoints to the extent that "police checkpoint" became nicknamed as "police cash point". Police brutality, corruption and violence that were inheritance from colonial police force have not changed. For example, due to public outcry of police brutality and extortion at the checkpoint which continue even after the period under assessment, the Inspector General of Police (Yusuf Abubakar) ordered the dismantling of all police checkpoints nationwide on assuming office in 2012. Furthermore, in the editorial/opinion column of *The Nation* Newspaper, the Inspector-General of Police was quoted as tasking officers on professionalism. The paper stated: "remove this rot in the police and have your name written in gold".¹⁷

This view is supported by Ogunlade.¹⁸ He asserts that, police brutality, violence and corruption have been legacies inherited from its colonial past; the colonial master used the police for suppression and also for military expeditions. According to him, ever since, the police have

remained an instrument of force, intimidation and oppression in the hands of the ruling classes.

The inability of the Nigeria police to rise up to challenge violent crime in the country, particularly bank robbery, has brought the rating of the force low in the eyes of public scrutiny. In addition to the above, the inability of the police to unravel some politically motivated killings like that of late Bola Ige, Harry Marshall, Kudirat Abiola, etc., a task that Obasanjo promised to accomplish before leaving office, has forced the public to look at the Nigeria police with scorn and suspicion. The ineffectiveness of the Nigeria police has made the public to disrespect them.

The above view is collaborated by Atta¹⁹ when he observes that it is presumed that "tax payers" money is being spent on an organization that does not give back anything to the society than brutality and extortion. He notes that the police are looked upon by the members of the society as an unproductive organization.

According to Okere²⁰, the attitude of the Nigeria police is characterized by arrogance and violence, which often results in killing and/or maiming of people. He further complains that the rigidity, arrogance and brutality with which some of Nigeria police go about their duty make it impossible for members of the force to wear a "human face" while at work.

The above assertion justifies why the anti-squad of the Nigeria police (Mobile Police) is nicknamed by the public as "kill and go". The term "kill and go" depicts the recklessness with which the Nigeria police waste lives of citizens that they are paid to protect.

Ogunlade supports the above position when he asserts that the common charges against the police are brutality, battery and harassment of innocent and defenceless public. He further explains that the police are created to preserve and ensure social order but ironically, it turns out to be a source of grave social disorder and a source of criminality and insecurity in society.

In his assessment of the police, Ogunlade further posits that, the robbers continue their operations untamed and the hired killers carry out ungodly acts successfully; he alleges that the police officers even aid criminals with logistic and technical supports.

The police ineptitude and nonchalant attitude to work can simply be described as the climax of indiscipline. This could be seen from the strike action embarked upon by the junior officers in 2002. According to

Dolapo²¹ on Thursday 7, 2002, the rank and file of Nigeria Police Force in Calabar refused to report for work. Their argument was that their insufficient salary was not paid promptly. As if that was the signal being awaited by other commands, junior police officers in other states soon joined their Cross-Rivers state counterparts.

Due to the nature of their duties, all military forces and Paramilitary forces, including the police, are not supposed to embark on any kind of industrial strike nor join industrial union. The strike action embarked upon by the police simply eroded the little confidence that the public reposed in them as protectors and enforcers of laws and orders in the country.

As a way of assessing the Nigeria police, the picture of United States Police painted by August Vollmer in 1929 had a direct bearing on the picture of Nigeria police during the period under review.

According to Earle,²²

the policeman is denounced by the public, criticized by preachers, ridiculed in the movies, berated by newspapers and unsupported by persecuting officers and judges; he is shunned by the respectable, hated by criminals, deceived by everyone, kicked around like a football by brainless or crooked politicians. He is exposed to countries temptations and dangers, condemned when he enforces the law and dismissed when he doesn't; he is supposed to possess the qualifications of the soldiers, doctor, lawyer, diplomat and educator with remuneration less than that of a daily labourer.

No wonder, any Nigeria home video that ridicules the police is always an instant "best seller". The criminals in Nigeria hate police and the police are afraid of armed robbers. This explains why the Nigeria Police often arrive at robbery scene several hours after the robbery has taken place.

The judiciary is the third arm of government in Nigeria. The judiciary is supposed to be independent based on the Nigerian constitution. However, some of the activities of the judiciary, particularly the courts of law, show that the independent status is more of a theoretical frame work than in practice. Empirical evidences show that the judiciary

is a mere tool in the hands of the "Executive" that has equal independent status as the judiciary. In Nigeria, it is the Executive that appoints the members of the judiciary to office and also has the power to remove the judiciary members from office. This explains why in some cases, the judiciary often dances to the tune of the Executive when it comes to adjudication of cases before the courts.

In Nigeria, particularly during Obasanjo's second term in office, the executive often influence the outcome of cases brought before the courts. The interference and flouting of court orders by the Executive (often than not) portrayed the judiciary in a bad light before the public. This is also a mockery of the independent status of the judiciary.

According to Dolapo and Akeem,²³ in the later days of Obasanjo's government, the executive publicly flouted some courts order. For example, the court ruled that Independent Nigeria Electoral Commission (INEC) had no right to disqualify any candidate from contesting election based on administrative panel of inquiry set up by government agency, Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) which is not a law court. INEC disregarded this law and went on to disqualify candidates. They further commented that indicted but influential Nigerians walked freely on the streets using suspicious bail for medical and health reasons or the option of plea-bargaining as excuses to escape from trial.

Nigeria courts during Obasanjo's second term and even up till now are characterized with delay justice. Of course, justice delay is often justice denial. It is the delay in justice that often results into prisons congestion. In Nigeria, due to delay and prolonged justice, suspected criminal could spend so many years in prison awaiting trial. For example, some key officers of the former Head of State (Gen. Sanni Abacha) who were suspected of having committed crimes against the state have been standing trial for more than eight years now.

According to Nwaka,²⁴ the Legal Aid Council of Nigeria (LACON) says more than 70% of inmates awaiting trial in Nigeria have been robbed of prospects of trial or release. She further explains that: "many of the inmates were women, children and vulnerable locked behind bars with no prospects of trial and release".

Majority of Nigeria prisons still maintain the status quo inherited from colonial master (Britain). Due to over crowded prison in Nigeria, both minor and hardened criminals are put together in the same cells. As a

result, minor criminals, if they are eventually released, come out as hardened criminals.

The rehabilitation and corrective measures put in place in most Nigeria prisons are not adequate. This explains why most discharged criminals often find themselves back in prison. This is because they lack proper orientation or training that will make them face the reality of life after prisons term.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes that no single individual or particular government should be held responsible for dismal performance of the criminal justice. This is so, because the performance of the criminal justice in all previous administrations in Nigeria, before the one under review, is not even better. The paper, therefore, suggests that the colonial mentality or approach to the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria should be overhauled.

Since the centralized policing system in Nigeria is not very efficient in crime control and prevention, there is the need to operate a decentralized police. This will reduce the over bearing influence of the federal government police, courts and prisons.

Thirdly, the judiciary should be made to be really independent. Appointment of judges and court officers should not be left in the hands of the Federal Governments to avoid manipulation and undue influence and interference.

In addition to the above, there is the need to restructure the prison in Nigeria to wear a new face of modernity with modern facility that will enhance rehabilitation and correcting of inmates.

To avoid delay justice, more courts and judges should be appointed and should be given a time frame to dispense cases brought before them.

Finally, an independent disciplinary body should be established to try discipline members of the police force that violate laws that they are paid to enforce. The role of the independent body is to make sure that any act of unethical practices should not go unpunished.

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