The archaeology of political corruption in Nigeria

Although well researched, a gap remains in our understanding of political corruption. This is because corruption in general and political corruption in particular lacks a theoretical foundation. Dr Arno Boenner takes a closer examination of the history of corrupt countries, focusing on the colonial past of politically corrupt nations. Rather than examining nations in isolation, he believes that historical context should be examined, focusing on imperialism, including analysis of the colonising country and the colonised country. The work can be regarded as a special case of international relations, as it deals with the interplay between foreign companies, the Nigerian state, and its colonial predecessors. The essential theoretical foundation is laid by historical institutionalism, which deals with the historical genesis of institutions. His study takes an interdisciplinary approach as historical institutionalism is combined with economic, sociological, philosophical, historical and Marxist-inspired theories and explanatory approaches.

Dr Boenner’s work is published in Nigeria: An Archaeology of Political Corruption. Despite being independent for many decades, the current state of Nigeria cannot be separated from its history as part of the British Empire. Dr Boenner argues that Nigeria’s present political corruption is rooted in the permissive legislation for joint-stock companies during the mid-19th century Mancheter Liberalism. These corporations, settling in the Niger Delta in the 1880s, represent the forerunners of the Nigerian state, laying the foundation of political corruption. Political corruption is the product of a continuous interplay between the state of Nigeria, its colonial precursors, and foreign companies operating on Nigerian territory.

CORRUPTION AND A COLONIAL PAST

Of the 50 most politically corrupt countries, 25 are within the African continent. Except for a few countries, many were formerly part of European empires, leading Dr Boenner to question whether there may be a causal link. Could the corruption that exists in Nigeria today be exported by the British? Much political research focuses on Nigeria as it exists from independence in 1960 until today. Thus, it ignores the historical context that contributes to the functioning of present-day institutions. Dr Boenner examines more than 120 years of Nigerian history to discover whether the seeds of corruption were sown during the colonial years. He identifies a gap in research regarding the perception of political corruption as a cross-cultural and cross-continental historical phenomenon that isn’t dealt with systematically. Therefore, the analysis does not begin in the present nor in Africa, but in Europe before imperial expansion. In essence, Dr Boenner attempts to find a causal link between imperialism and corruption.

ORIGINS IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

To test this hypothesis, Dr Boenner goes back to the British entered Africa. In the 1830s, Britain embodies an economic approach of Manchester Liberalism. This is a laissez-faire mindset, arguing for low regulation and free trade. During the Victorian age, this was regarded by many as the route towards a more equitable society. Britain, more than its European neighbours, favoured this model. However, research into this period reveals a high level of political corruption, exemplified by 1840s railway mania. Dr Boenner’s research argues that this corruption was exported to Africa during the colonial years, supported by a permissive joint-stock company law. At the end of the 19th century, foreign joint-stock companies began to base themselves in Nigerian territory, pursuing commercial objectives, first, by establishing trade relationships and, second, by claiming territory. Company rule was first executed by British corporations rather than formal colonial rule.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Dr Boenner’s methodology is an archaeological approach to the history of Nigeria’s system of government. He divides history into four distinct periods, examining each one in isolation. Business operations are enabled and supported by a company-owned army, the Royal Niger Company Army.

First Period: Spans from 1830 to 1885, before Britain expands into Nigeria. It is a time of sustainable economic and technological progress. The Industrial Revolution is in full swing, leading to a phenomenon referred to as railway mania. Due to the vast amount of wealth involved, legislation is often incomplete, allowing businesses to do what they need to increase profits. This rampant liberalism, Dr Boenner suggests, contributes to the emergence of a system prone to corruption.

Second Period: The period lasting from 1886 to 1899 is when the Royal Niger Company expands into Nigeria and develops business activities. Dr Boenner is particularly interested in how the Royal Niger Company builds a business with roots in Britain, takes over the Niger Delta. The Royal Niger Company is a joint-stock company endowed with a royal charter, meaning that it can behave as a governmental organisation pursuing colonial interests and doing business.

Third Period: This begins in 1900 and lasts until Nigeria gains independence in 1960. The territory conquered by the Royal Niger Company is designated as a regular protectorate, allowing British companies to do business freely with little regulation. This creates the groundwork in which systemic corruption can flourish.

Fourth Period: The period under consideration begins with Nigerian
Behind the Research

Dr Arno Boenner researches the historical roots and connection between imperialism and political corruption in Nigeria. His research objectives include identifying the factors that contribute to political corruption and the potential interventions to address it.

References


Personal Response

How have some postcolonial countries, such as Botswana, managed to avoid the levels of corruption seen in Nigeria?

In the case of Botswana, the following key success factors could be identified. After independence a sustainable transition of (colonial) technocratic and bureaucratic expertise was carried out smoothly. Botswana’s judiciary has proved to be independent from influences of the executive, thus contributing strongly to high scores of rule of law. Botswana’s administration is organised strictly applying meritocratic principles, thus laying the fundament for high levels of accountability. Botswana’s military has limited itself to constitutional tasks and responsibilities, obeying the primacy of politics and not claiming government power. Among others, these success factors enable the country to reach low levels of corruption and to operate international joint ventures for the benefit of the people of Botswana.

Bio

Dr Arno Boenner, born 1968, studied business administration at the Universities of Marburg and Giessen, Germany. 2015 Doctorate in Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science, University of Wrocław, Poland. Business professional with global players, specialising in IT applications and analytics since 1998.

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