



CORRUPT LEADERSHIP AND POVERTY IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR THE APPLICATION OF KANT'S RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

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Abstracts

The work examines the impact of leadership failures in Nigeria and how Kant's retributive justice could curb corruption, stealing of public funds, and poverty in Nigeria. It has been a long time since Nigerians expected positive changes and development in the country, which have yet to be experienced. However, bad governance and corruption, as intertwined concepts, have largely dealt a serious blow to the hopes and expectations of the average Nigerian, thanks to corrupt leadership and the stealing of public funds. The worsening level of poverty, kidnapping and killings recorded in the country could have been avoided if effective and productive leadership were in place. In his metaphysics of morals, Kant argued that retributive justice should be applied as a deterrent against corrupt leaders who impoverish the citizens. Previous studies called for true federalism and the declaration of assets but did not consider retributive justice as a solution to lingering poverty and corrupt practices among Nigerian leaders. Using the phenomenological and textual interpretation methods, the paper argues that in achieving a poverty- and corruption-free environment, Nigeria should put in place retributive justice in the form of a death penalty measure to discourage corrupt leadership in Nigeria, as is obtainable in China.

Keywords: Nigeria, Leadership, Poverty, Corruption, Retributive justice, Kant.

Introduction

One might think that a country shaped by many cultures and faiths, like Nigeria, would pull its different communities together to build something strong - yet that never really happened. Right after freedom from colonial rule, Nigerian leaders could have led with deep care for their people, aiming to grow things from within; however, corruption quickly took over. (Mlambo. Mubecua and Mlambo, 2023) The roots stretch back to a divided setup left behind by Britain, where power was split and the center had little real control (Azoro, Ona & Agulefo, 2021, 63). According to Herbert and Husain (2018: 5), oil shapes much of Nigeria's turmoil because it turned the country into one where power flows from wealth handed out, not earned. Instead of working through fair systems, people grab what they can at will without caring for others. Leaders who care more about control than fairness widened gaps across communities. Based on the above statement, Salisu, Aminu, Abdulkadri, Yero and Inuwa (2025) revealed that corruption is twofold in nature; it drives unemployment and, over time, raises poverty levels in Nigeria. According to them, take a look at the crumbling health and education facilities; hence, they are crucial areas for building a skilled and healthy workforce, yet rampant corruption undermines them. As a result, many Nigerians find themselves unprepared for demanding high-paying jobs because those corrupt individuals running government institutions — the ones meant to manage national resources for the good of all — end up hoarding those resources for themselves.



The impact of political corruption on the growth of poverty in Nigeria was highlighted by Sule, Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2018) when they opined that political corruption caused poverty and poor governance and that as far as policies that can eradicate poverty, such as the National Poverty Eradication Program, are considered, the entire process of eradication of poverty is marred by corrupt practices, as well as other forms of malfeasance and selfishness. As a result of the above situation, trust faded; anger grew and then came protest movements, armed factions, suspicion everywhere, even voices calling for breakaway states - all demanding a piece of resources amid deepening hardship. According to Musa (2025), who gets chosen to lead depended less on skill, more on connections, kinship ties, and blind allegiance rather than real ability. Looking back, the way past leaders handled corruption often lacked real commitment - truth be told, their actions rarely matched their words. Take Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, and Nkahi (2015), for example: a study on corruption among Nigeria's rulers that shattered the country's economic progress is revealed in collapsed state enterprises: airlines grounded, electricity firms broken; courts weakened, politics hollowed out and so on. Because of this, the country stays poor, draining wealth through careless hands year after year.

Based on the above arguments, Kant weighed in from his work, *Metaphysics of Morals* - he argued that proportional penalty must be served as a boundary marker against corruption, meant to hold society together and prevent decay in character (1996, 333). Justice, for Kant, stands firm only when matched exactly to wrongdoing. Because someone broke the law, they must face consequences - nothing more, nothing less.

It is on the above background that this paper shall examine leadership approaches in Nigeria and how Kant's argument of retributive justice could deter our leaders from corrupt practices that impoverish the people. To accomplish this, we will discuss: (i) leadership failures, corruption and poverty in Nigeria (ii) poverty in Nigeria (iii) Kant's notion of retributive justice as a *Sine qua non* for solving leadership failures, poverty, and corruption in Nigeria. It is hoped that our discussions in this paper will provide an enabling ground for the emancipation of the country from perpetual poverty and violence as a result of corrupt leadership.

Leadership Failures, Corruption and Poverty in Nigeria

It is true that Nigeria stands tall in global talks on democracy. Yet, outcomes tell another story for Africa's former powerhouse. Britain amalgamated people who had no shared beliefs, no common rule. That move cracked trust early. Merged without care, Nigerians seemed mismatched till now (Tangban, Isokon, Egbe & Bassey, 2020). Who really needs to debate Nigerian leaders' performance when the results show failure at every turn? To back this up, Achebe concludes:

Nothing describes Nigeria's leadership problem more than the word "tribe". Tribe has been accepted in Nigeria as a friend but has been rejected as an enemy due to its negative effects on the nation. In spite of claims and verbal utterances of Nigerian leaders that this nation is great, there is no doubt that this nation harbours one of the world's most unpatriotic citizens. Quite revealing, unity or patriotism cannot be easily found in a country that is badly run as Nigeria is. Leaders in Nigeria call for patriotism, unity, and peace, but their actions are only verbal and do not exist within them or in the work of their hands either. (1988, 1-22).



Power used wrongly by officials puts Nigeria's progress at risk. Money set aside for growth vanishes through theft by those in charge. Take Senator Ike Ekweremmadu - his actions show how some ignore local clinics while seeking care overseas. When problems like these come up, Oladele offers this view:

In the end, there is a poor state of living in all aspects of our social structure. This condition was caused by mistrust and insecurity, bad governance, poverty, lack of social Amenities, corruption, and injustice. Others include a poor educational system, ethnic divisions, religious fanaticism and underdevelopment of the average Nigerian (2014, 21).

The above statement gives credence to the effects of bad leadership that is rampant in our political terrain. There is a saying that life depends on what we make it; hence, the high rate of poverty in Nigeria is ordinarily the result of poor leadership and corruption. The need for a good leader was made manifest in the Philosophy of Plato as described by Ioanna. As if he knew the bad state of leadership in Nigeria, he asserts:

A man who cannot rule himself and has been submitted to pleasures, richness, pricelessness, and unbridled freedom is not suitable for leadership. The leader must be distinguished by the strong will, the courage of pleasure and the power of virtue (Ioanna, 2018).

That comment points straight at the sort of leaders Nigeria really needs. Since civilian leadership came back in 1999, efforts have emerged to tackle both corruption and poor management. Steps like shrinking oversized workforces, changing how payments happen in government jobs to cut down waste, and overhauling purchasing rules - these became part of the plan that never worked. New bodies showed up too: outfits like EFCC and ICPC formed to chase financial crimes and unethical behaviour head-on. Still, progress hasn't matched expectations because dishonesty and misrule seep through almost everything in the country. What troubles many now isn't just outrage being loud - it's that blame often stops at borders drawn by tribe, faith, status, or sex (Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nkah, 2015). Out here, bad leaders have wrecked Nigeria's economy. Because of that, the country's airline - Nigeria Airways - is gone now, cleared out so private carriers like Air Peace could step in. The power utility, PHCN, got shut down on purpose, making space for private energy firms to take over. NITEL, once the main telecom, vanished too, just as others popped up privately. Public universities barely function anymore, left lifeless while new private ones are frequently established. Affirming how corrupt our leaders are, they add:

Since gaining independence in 1960, most Nigerian leaders have not clearly demonstrated a sense of genuine national development. They went further to argue that most African leaders plunder, defraud, embezzle and mismanage their countries' human and natural resources with so much impunity. They are possessive, egoistic, selfish, individualistic, callous, greedy and secretive, so that transparency and accountability have no place in their administration and management of common and collective wealth.

Still, after looking inwards, huge money from oil sales is huge while people live poorly - such a gap feels disheartening. Research points out how deeply corruption harms Nigeria's economy;



experts even call it a fatal illness. (Amah, 2018: 134). Unless leaders act together and take real charge, this pattern might drag on. Broken trust runs deep, shaping weak leadership and frayed communities. Nowhere is progress visible, since basic needs go unmet for most people. Because systems fail, what little exists crumbles without maintenance. Growth sputters under the weight of neglect, while hope dims in empty promises. Infrastructure built long ago now leans toward collapse, ignored and dilapidated. Lives stretch thinner each year, caught in cycles of kidnapping school children and individuals in society. The recent kidnapping in Oyo State is an example of the level of security problems in Nigeria. Adediran, Ogundele, Bodunde, Ola, and Fasae (2025) revealed that results indicate an increase in the occurrence of abduction cases in recent years, with most of them taking place in rural and semi-rural settings, especially in places that are not very well-guarded. According to them, ransom was discovered to be the motive behind most of the abduction cases, with the victims chosen based on economic strength.

Poor people struggle across Nigeria, blocking progress in how the country grows socially and economically. Though the time for a stronger economy is here, efforts to fix deep poverty have hardly moved the needle on human well-being scores. Job shortages mix with worsening food and rent price shifts, unrest, weak systems, and harm spreading through communities - this combo puts Nigeria near breaking point unless something changes fast. Based on the above situation, Dannan (2018) argued that many plans were launched aimed at cutting down poor conditions nationwide but yielded little result. Past drives led by those in charge included pushing food growth locally under banners such as Operation Feed the Nation, the Green Revolution phase and so on. Still, none lifted daily survival levels where it counts most - for regular lives lived on the ground. According to Gong and Tu (2022), corruption also flourished among China's top leaders, but frequent crackdowns and executions in order to fix broken systems inside their government brought about a reduction in the level of corruption in the country. They opined that these drives targeted rotten parts of the party and kicked out dishonest officials. Because of the above example, it is suggested that Nigeria should apply Kant's retributive justice of Kant as capital punishment when dealing with graft because fixing deep corruption might require extreme steps.

Poverty in Nigeria

According to a number of metrics, poverty is a significant barrier to Nigeria's socioeconomic progress. Even during times of economic expansion, poverty has remained in Nigeria, and numerous initiatives have failed to significantly raise the country's Human Development Index. Nigeria, which is struggling with issues including unemployment, ethnicity, kidnapping, and violence, faces serious risks of issues if poverty is not addressed. According to Dannan (2018), a number of policies and projects aimed at reducing poverty have been implemented in Nigeria. Some of these, according to the author, were sectarian interventions, but their overall goal was poverty reduction. Notable poverty reduction initiatives pursued by Nigerian leaders include: Operation Feed the Nation (Agriculture), Free and Compulsory Primary Education (Education), the Green Revolution (Agriculture), Low Cost Housing (Housing), River Basin Development Authorities (Agriculture), National Agricultural Land Development Authority (Agriculture), Agricultural Development Fund (Agriculture); yet, their success did not see the light of day.

In Nigeria, bad governance, impunity, and structural problems- illiteracy, ignorance, unemployment, and corruption have ingrained this culture, which is shown in poor orientation, a low standard of living, a high rate of social ills, political turmoil, and abuse of religion. The above problems did not go unnoticed when Alaye and Fakoya (2025) opined that politicians and other



public servants frequently exhibit traits such as self-centeredness, greed, and corruption, enriching themselves at the expense of the nation's shared wealth. There has been much discussion about corruption in Nigeria over the years. Even with its vast oil resources, Nigeria is still socioeconomically behind, with 70% of its people still living in poverty. To alleviate poverty, it is advised that the government pass laws prohibiting improper conduct and official corruption. Consequently, Perry (2022) once more noted that several decades ago, China's central government initiated a number of correctional campaigns seeking to purge "corrupt " and self-centered individuals and state institutions by deposing dishonest public servants. The above statement forms the basis for the next topic that calls for the introduction of Kantian retributive justice in the form of the death penalty against corrupt leaders in Nigeria.

Corrupt Leadership and Poverty in Nigeria: A Case for the Application of Kant's Retributive Justice in Nigeria

Killing someone as punishment happens when courts decide a crime was so bad that death is the response. History shows that stopping corruption matters more than just how common it gets - shapes and styles shift across places. That twist makes tackling corruption tough, always dragging on without clear wins. The ultimate cost lands on those convicted of the worst crimes by proper legal authority. In short, losing life follows rulings tied to severe wrongdoing. According to Esoimeme (2020) hidden money flows have drained more than 157 billion US dollars in ten years. Still, one stubborn doubt lingers: can execution really stop crime like some claim? Keeping capital punishment on the books divides opinion across modern Nigeria. Now comes a sharper turn - it stays written into law for serious crimes, yet voices grow louder asking if those words ought to vanish instead. In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1996) warned that wrongdoing demands payback and people who break moral law ought to face pain matching their act. According to him, because they harmed, not to prevent future trouble or fix society, punishment finds its only right in desert. When fairness dies, life loses worth, according to him - a rule carved in duty, not shaped by results. Take murder: only a life taken answers the scale; nothing less strikes balance. Death for killers stands firm, since justice cannot bend without breaking itself. Now imagine leaders caught stealing power or betraying public faith - where does this strict logic lead? Trust cracks when officials cheat; rules weaken, people doubt one another, order frays at the edges (Kant, 1996). Harm spreads quietly through institutions until shared safety feels fragile. So if penalties must fit guilt exactly, what measure fits grand betrayal, he concludes? No compromise shows up in Kant's view - it either applies fully or collapses entirely. When people in power ignore their responsibility, they break more than rules - they damage trust. Justice fades when officials put themselves first, using others like tools instead of honouring worth (Kant, 1993). Respect matters, not just laws, if government wants to stay fair. The moment leaders exploit citizens, the ground beneath authority cracks. Holman agreed with the above opinion when he concluded that what seems like mere dishonesty becomes something deeper - a collapse of principle (Holman, 2018).

How far can broken values go before systems lose meaning? Such ideas unsettle easy assumptions about rule and order. When corruption takes root, public faith begins to crumble while people's rights get trampled underfoot - stability fades bit by bit. Justice matters deeply in Kant's view; so does how communities honour one another through fair systems. Officials failing their role break more than rules - they fracture ethical commitments tied to fairness and personhood alike (Holtman, 2018). Using others solely for private benefit strips away dignity, something Kant sees as never acceptable. Such abuse isn't just crime-like behaviour - it hollows out what allows government to be seen as rightful at all. Udoudom, Bassey, and Adie (2019) point out that Kant's penal theory doesn't fit neatly into just one category of punishment. Instead, it weaves together aspects of



retribution—where punishment is seen as a deserved response to wrongdoing—and prevention, which aims to deter future offenses (Potter, 2002). The criminal penalty theory of Kant includes both the purposes of retribution and prevention, which, in turn, are consistent with the author's concept of the importance of state power. It is possible to say that this understanding of the criminal penalty theory corresponds to the idea of the state being under the obligation to protect its law-abiding members through all necessary methods, including capital punishment (Udoudom, Bassey, and Adie, 2019). This is all grounded in Kant's belief that a strong state authority is essential for addressing moral failings. This perspective implies that Kant's approach is less about picking one punishment goal over another and more about harmonizing them into a unified system of justice, where the state represents a rational moral order. Because wrongdoing breaks shared rules of right and wrong, one idea goes, offenders lose standing and fall under total control by authorities. The implication is that protection of obedient people comes next; that role pushes the system toward tools like execution. Fear built into harsh responses can block attacks on order, it's thought - one outcome feeds another. Heavy measures do double work: they warn, then crush offenders (Kant, 1993).

Importance of Death Penalty in Nigeria

(a) Incapacitation

Holding someone back through physical force might stop him from causing more harm - while locked away, they simply cannot act. As long as jail keeps a person inside, chances of committing specific illegal acts drop sharply; some actions become impossible (Electronic copy, 2023). This idea rests on guessing: if left free, the offender would likely repeat past behaviour. So instead, removal from society aims to block what could happen later, cutting risk before it grows. Yet every moment outside society hinders means for potential trouble-making. One moment a person might function fully; the next, they cannot. Temporary loss of ability happens – sometimes, it sticks around forever (James Stephen, 1965). No other punishment deters men so effectually from committing crimes as the punishment of death... Was there ever yet a criminal who, when sentenced to death and brought out to die, would refuse the offer of a commutation of his sentence for the severest secondary punishment? Surely not. Some folks think capital punishment ought to stay, mainly because they figure it scares off would-be offenders more than other penalties do. Their stance leans heavily on deterrence - the belief that harsh consequences can block criminal behaviour before it happens. The logic here isn't only about stopping repeated offenses through quick, intense repercussions; instead, severity aims to warn others thinking of breaking rules too. As Plato (2020) put it back then:

If any citizen be found guilty of any great or unmentionable wrong, either in relation to the gods, or his parents, or the state, the judge deem him incurable... His punishment shall be death, which to him will be the least of evils, and his example will benefit others, if he perish ingloriously.

(b) It serves the end of justice

People who back the death penalty see crime as something that throws justice off balance and they say the only solution is to make the person pay the same way. So, if someone kills another or embezzles a large sum of money that affects others so much, the killer or the corrupt individual has to face execution, or else the whole thing falls short of what justice requires. It seems this view draws straight from that old eye-for-an-eye thinking where punishment matches the act in the same



measure. Retributionists hold that every offender deserves to get paid back in their own coin and for murder that means the death penalty is the right fit (Bohm, 2017).

Some of this gets repeated in debates but it stays pretty much the same point. China managed to cut down corruption a lot by using heavy penalties under their criminal law including death sentences for those caught. Their economy has kept growing because of that strict approach and people here are pointing to it now (Peerenboom, 2015). With the new government talking so much about fighting corruption, different voices are pushing for the same kind of law in Nigeria including this article to stop the scourge of corruption and poverty. There are arguments whether this measure will work in Nigeria but we are optimistic that the gains would show up if the rules were applied the same way. However, the idea keeps coming up because till now, corruption is not totally wiped out in China but their success in dealing with corruption looks like one clear example that seems to have paid off (Kesuma, 2021).

Conclusion

Nigeria has experienced serious leadership failures due to unending corrupt practices by its leaders. Consequently, it has led to the spread of poverty in Nigeria. As a solution to the escalating level of corruption and poverty in Nigeria, there is the need to put in place, Kants retributive justice in order to deter citizens and leaders from embezzling public funds and subsequently use the available funds to engage in development based activities.

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