

LESSONS FROM THE EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT
FOR PUBLIC MORALITY IN NIGERIA

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The establishment of the National Orientation Agency (NOA) by Decree No. 100 in 1993, Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), by Decree No. 1 of 1989, and the Public Complaints Commission (PCC) by Decree No. 31 in 1975, represent laudable attempts to sanitize the Nigerian society morally, and to ensure a high standard of public morality and accountability for public servants, and a sound political education and consciousness for all citizens.

In order to fully appreciate the seriousness of the effort made it is necessary to examine carefully the provisions made in the decree establishing each of these institutions, and in particular the stated goals or aims of the arrangements made. These will not be reproduced fully here, for the sake of space, but stated briefly.

The function of NOA is to mobilize and enlighten the populace and promote the inculcating of ethical behaviour in all spheres of life, whilst promoting such wholesome political values as democratic practice and patriotism in the interest of national development. The aim of the Code of Conduct Bureau is, broadly, to "establish and maintain a high standard of morality in the conduct of government business and to ensure that the actions and behaviour of public officers conform to the highest standard of public morality and accountability." The function of the Public Complaints Commission is to serve as an Ombudsman, a means of curtailing state power to prevent abuse of office and power.

We note that all of these institutions have been in existence in Nigeria for more than one decade. NOA which appears to be less than a decade old is not really completely new, but a merger of existing institutions, namely MAMSER, National Orientation Movement (NOM), the Public Enlightenment and the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) divisions of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Two questions arise:

1. Why does the existing arrangement made to ensure public morality and accountability, ethical behaviour in all spheres of our national life, and strict adherence to wholesome (righteous) political values not appear to be working?
2. What lessons can the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria (COCEN) learn from the existing institutional arrangement?

To the first question, three general answers can be given for what they are worth. FIRST, the effort at societal reform has not been sustained because of a lack of continuity and stability in government and the direction of public policy.

SECOND, the mass mobilization strategies adopted are not rooted in our social system and traditional institutions, but in a foreign/western historical experience. We may take the Y-Brigade for a simple example. Consequently, the strategies do not touch the lives of the majority of the population. In addition the strategies are too urban based, while the Nigerian population is still largely rural, even though rapidly urbanizing.

The THIRD answer begs the question and is therefore hardly an answer except that this is one of the ways people in authority respond. Their response is that more time is needed--that it is too early to assess the performance of Nigeria since she is a young nation!

To answer the first question more specifically, let us note the following features of the existing institutional arrangement.

1. Backed by law. Their establishment is based on the law of God written in the heart of all men. Good conscience is implied. The objectives stated in the decrees are justiceable, and not mere platitudes. The only problem here is that the enabling law did not expressly acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and we know that only the Spirit giveth life; the letter killeth!
2. Legal provisions made for sanctions. The only problem here is that the provisions which were made came with their own loopholes. First, while there is punishment for offending, there is no positive reward for obedience. Sanction is necessary and good, but encouragement is more necessary and achieves more.
3. Legal exceptions made for "sacred cows" in the enforcement of provisions. While we can agree that some allowance should be made by way of giving honour to whom honour is due, in the area of social justice the important thing is to do justice and ensure that justice is seen to have been done, especially by the leadership.

Other loopholes exist in the decrees. Certain legal provisions that ought to have been made were not made at all. For example, it is not enough that assets be declared by the relevant public officers, but that what is declared should be verifiable for the sake of credibility and accountability.

4. Organizational structure exists at state level, even at the local government level in some cases. That arrangement should bring the reform close to the people. It is doubtful if this structure is good enough. What about below the local government level--at the community level, which is where the people live? The structure of these institutions has no roots. It is top heavy. The focus is at the macro level not the micro, and therefore penetration of the reforms is apt to be restricted.
5. System Operators were selected by Government on criteria that placed greater premium on criteria that may not be entirely altruistic.

For example, political suitability was valued more than spiritual and moral character, and federal character consideration was taken more seriously than the performance capability of the individuals. Appointees did not have to face any public screening. The success of the whole arrangement depends very largely on the calibre and credibility of its operators and that of the government they are seen to represent. Legal provision for the independence of these institutions from government control is one thing; what actually happens under a non-elected government is another.

6. The language of the whole movement aimed at societal reform is elitist and foreign to the vast majority of Nigerians. In that case, the values, norms and standards being espoused and canvassed are not easily understood or appreciated by the majority. The level of information saturation or enlightenment is still shallow, though perhaps reducing as a result of the effort of MAMSER and its successor, NOA.
7. Message contamination from source. A programme sponsored by government runs the risk of loss of credibility, unless that government has succeeded in endearing itself to the people being governed. As with a colonial government, so it is with national governments, at least in developing countries. There is an element of distrust of government. Ultimately, how the message of NOA, CCB, and PCC will be received by the majority of the people depends on their confidence or lack of it in the messengers, that is the Government and its appointees. The integrity of the messenger is as important as the values being preached.
8. The primary focus of the arrangement is on the people not on the leadership. In other words, the leadership is not held primarily accountable as God Himself does for the sins of the society. The logic of the problem demands that the leadership be held accountable first and foremost, before the people they lead. People tend to go only where their leaders will let them.
9. The institutional arrangement is practically silent on our traditional institutions, the notable keepers and promoters of our cultural values, and which are usually conservative and resistant to change in the direction of modernity which NOA, PCC, and CCB represent.
10. Cash, as distinct from other monetary instruments, is left to play a large role in our own type of cash economy. The "lordship" of cash in business and social transactions is unchallenged. Its place is too dominant a place in our lives. No wonder our currency notes tend to be dirty. There is less use of bank cheques because of the high level of illiteracy, and possibly dishonesty. Unfortunately, cash lends itself more easily to corrupt use, by virtue of its anonymity. It is more difficult to subject people using it to accountability and probity.

II. What can COCEN learn from the existing institutional arrangement in Nigeria?

1. The leadership must be the starting point of our monitoring effort, not the people, once the Nigeria Covenant has been put in place. That is the lesson from the seeming failure of the impressive effort of MAMSER. Failure of the leadership to abide by the obvious message of the whole movement aborts it. If the Nigeria Covenant is being breached by the leadership with impunity, their misdeeds will sooner or later infect the body of Christ they lead.
2. Our mobilization strategy should not be "up-down", but "down-up". It should start at the grass roots; and use a smaller territorial unity than the local government, because it is still not close enough to the people.
3. Sanctions will not work if the leadership is excluded or seen to be above sanction. It is the same leadership that has the authority to approve or allow sanction to be imposed on anybody else. They lose the moral authority they should have if they themselves are unable to say like Samuel of old, shoe ox have I taken? (1 Samuel 12:3).
4. Never leave out of down-play the name of Jesus, the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the whole movement. Put differently, let us have a great respect for the Word of God in the whole scheme of things. It is the unchanging reference point, the only enduring source and criteria we have. If this obvious emphasis is lost in our quest for ethical reformation, the movement can take a turn very different from what is now envisaged. The reason why the existing arrangement is doomed to failure is because it lacks the Spirit of God, and without that it is only a form, a shell.
5. Ways must be found of putting money in its proper place in social relations and transactions. Let us de-emphasize it. But that will take a lot of social engineering.