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ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA, 2015–2024

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Abstract:

This study examines the influence of ethical leadership on bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State, Nigeria, between 2015 and 2024. The central problem is whether ethical leadership can counter corrupt practices within the state's public service. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, the study investigates how ethical leadership affects bureaucratic corruption, identifies conditions that facilitate corruption and proposes measures for strengthening leadership practice in public institutions. It adopts a qualitative documentary approach and analyses published government reports, academic journal articles and credible news materials concerning the relationship between leadership and corruption. The findings indicate that ethical leadership can reduce corrupt practices, but weak regulatory frameworks, political interference and inadequate accountability limit its effectiveness. Transformational leaders who demonstrate integrity, transparency and ethical conduct are better positioned to discourage corruption. The study concludes that ethical leadership must be supported by effective institutions. It recommends compulsory ethics and leadership training for public officials, stronger accountability mechanisms and a sustained culture of transparency to reduce bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; leadership; bureaucracy; bureaucratic corruption; corruption; Rivers State; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership has become an important approach to combating corruption, particularly in public institutions. It refers to leadership conduct that conforms to moral standards and promotes accountability, transparency and integrity in the workplace. Political corruption, by contrast, occurs when political actors pursue private advantage through bribery, preferential treatment or the misuse of public resources (World Bank, 2022). The broad objective of this study is to analyse the role of ethical leadership in addressing bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State between 2015 and 2024. The background therefore proceeds from the global context to Africa, Nigeria and, finally, Rivers State.

Corruption has remained a persistent problem in Nigeria, despite repeated promises by successive leaders to eradicate it. Corrupt practices were evident in Nigeria's bureaucratic institutions from the early post-independence period and became particularly prominent during the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s (Shehu, 2019). Since the return to democratic government in 1999, successive administrations have introduced anti-corruption measures, although their results have varied. President Muhammadu Buhari, who served from 2015 to 2023, entered office on an anti-corruption platform, but the effectiveness and impartiality of that agenda remained contested (Akinyemi, 2021).

Ethical leadership remains a major challenge in Nigeria's public institutions because many political and administrative elites have been implicated in corrupt practices. Despite the establishment of agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), bureaucratic corruption persists because laws are weakly enforced and officials are not consistently held accountable (Ojo, 2021). Although the Buhari administration dismissed or prosecuted some officials accused of corruption, critics argued that these measures were selective and insufficient to address corruption at a systemic level (Kazeem, 2022).

The interaction between corrupt bureaucratic practices, clientelism and ethical leadership is deeply rooted in many African societies. Numerous African states, particularly their public bureaucracies, continue to experience high levels of corruption (Transparency International, 2023). The African Union has adopted several anti-corruption measures, including the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, which encourages member states to

promote ethical conduct as part of their response to corruption (AU, 2021). Ethical leadership can help build a culture of accountability, transparency and integrity. Nevertheless, weak institutions and political patronage have made such leadership difficult to sustain in many African countries, including Nigeria. Although Rivers State has introduced reforms, bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption remain serious concerns, demonstrating the need for stronger enforcement of anti-corruption laws and improved ethical standards among leaders.

Statement of the Problem

Bureaucratic corruption and deficiencies in ethical leadership affect governance systems across the world. Corruption weakens democratic institutions, reduces the quality of governance and constrains economic development. It is commonly understood as the misuse of public office for private gain and remains widespread in many developing countries. The World Bank (2020) identifies corruption as a major threat to global economic and social development and estimates that its economic costs are substantial. Ethical leadership, which emphasises integrity, transparency, accountability and fairness, is widely regarded as an important means of limiting corruption. However, a persistent gap remains between professed leadership ethics and actual bureaucratic practice, including in African states that have formally adopted anti-corruption measures.

In Africa, corruption remains a major obstacle to sustainable development. Institutionalised corruption affects several levels of governance, including leadership positions in which ethical standards are frequently compromised. Although the African Union adopted the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption in 2003, anti-corruption initiatives in many countries remain underfunded, limited in scope or weakly monitored (Transparency International, 2022). The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's African Governance Report 2021 similarly identifies weak governance and poor leadership ethics as continuing concerns. In many sub-Saharan African states, impunity within public bureaucracies reduces the quality of public services. This problem has significant consequences for Nigeria, one of Africa's largest economies.

Corruption is one of Nigeria's major governance problems, with serious consequences for public institutions, economic development and social welfare. Successive governments have introduced measures such as the EFCC and the ICPC, but their results have been uneven. Nigeria ranked 150th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating a severe perception of public-sector corruption. One contributing factor is the failure of public-sector leaders to establish and enforce ethical standards consistently. Leadership is often perceived as lacking the moral commitment required to combat corruption effectively, particularly when senior officials are themselves implicated in corrupt activities (Afolabi & Onabanjo, 2022).

Against this background, the study investigates how weaknesses in ethical leadership have contributed to the persistence of bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State since 2015. It examines the nature of corruption and the role of political and administrative leaders in sustaining or reducing it within the civil service and public administration. The study addresses the connection between ethical leadership and corruption from the global level to the specific experience of Rivers State. It also considers the effectiveness of existing anti-corruption initiatives and proposes practical measures for strengthening ethical governance at the subnational level.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has ethical leadership influenced bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State, Nigeria, between 2015 and 2024?
2. What role have ethical leadership practices played in reducing corrupt activities within the Rivers State public sector between 2015 and 2024?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State, Nigeria, from 2015 to 2024. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Assess the influence of ethical leadership on bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State, Nigeria, from 2015 to 2024.
2. Examine the role of ethical leadership in reducing corrupt activities in the Rivers State public sector between 2015 and 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethics

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with moral values and judgements about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and fair or unfair. Ethical standards provide rules by which individual and collective conduct may be assessed. The concept seeks to establish principles that guide human action towards justice, equity and the general welfare (Melden, 1950). The history of Western ethical thought is commonly traced to ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who examined the nature of virtue and right conduct (MacIntyre, 1984).

In contemporary society, ethics extends across disciplines such as medicine, business, law and education, where it provides guidance for resolving moral problems while respecting human rights and dignity (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). In medical ethics, for example, beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice guide decisions that involve benefits, risks and respect for patients' choices (Gillon, 1994). Business ethics similarly emphasises corporate responsibility, transparency, integrity and fairness in the treatment of stakeholders and in an organisation's relationship with society (Crane & Matten, 2007).

Ethics is equally important in public policy and governance. Ethical governance requires the transparent management of public resources, accountability in decision-making and fairness in the exercise of authority. This position reflects

Kant's principle that every person should be treated as an end in themselves rather than merely as a means to another end (Kant, 1785). Ethical governance therefore requires policies and institutions that promote social justice and equity (Frederickson, 1993). Distributive justice, for example, concerns the fair allocation of social resources in accordance with citizens' needs and rights (Rawls, 1971).

Ethics influences human conduct and decision-making across public administration, business, healthcare and other sectors. Although its philosophical foundations are ancient, ethical reasoning remains relevant to contemporary challenges such as digital privacy, inequality and environmental sustainability. Ethical values are therefore central to both personal responsibility and collective decision-making, and they must evolve in response to changing social conditions.

Leadership

Leadership has been defined in several ways. Hersey and Blanchard, cited in Aibieyi (2014), describe it as the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group towards the achievement of objectives in a particular situation. Aibieyi (2014) also associates leadership with innovation, initiative, creativity, adaptability and agility. Ololube (2017) defines leadership as the art of influencing people to work willingly and enthusiastically towards collective objectives. In an institutional setting, leadership involves a purposeful relationship between leaders and followers through which conduct is directed towards agreed goals.

Leadership is a crucial organisational factor because leaders perform complex functions and mobilise people towards collective objectives (Chuang et al., 2013). It may be understood through the characteristics and conduct of leaders, but it is fundamentally a process of influence. Effective leaders communicate a credible vision, develop practical strategies for achieving it and inspire members to contribute beyond minimum expectations. Bass (1985) explains that effective leadership can produce performance beyond ordinary expectations by connecting individual effort to a shared purpose. Organisational effectiveness therefore depends substantially on the quality of leadership, particularly a leader's capacity to anticipate change, identify opportunities and motivate followers towards high performance and productivity.

Leadership is a process through which a person guides and coordinates others in pursuit of a shared objective. It involves communication between leaders and followers and depends on conduct that members consider legitimate and effective. Leadership is therefore a central element in the operation of any organisation or group, although scholars approach it from several theoretical perspectives.

Bodla and Nawaz (2010) argue that leadership has existed since the beginning of organised human interaction and has attracted sustained scholarly attention. Long et al. (2012) link the demand for effective leadership to the need for rules, direction and influence in the achievement of established objectives. Hersey and Blanchard (1993) emphasise the coordination of activities around the leader, while Bass (1990) highlights the leader's role in resolving problems, setting priorities and initiating development. Leadership is therefore associated with legitimate power, judgement and the capacity to mobilise followers.

Bureaucracy

Eme and Edeh (2007) identify two major perspectives on bureaucracy: the Weberian and Marxian approaches. Max Weber, the German sociologist who popularised the modern concept, presented bureaucracy as a rational and efficient method of organising government, administration and industry. From this perspective, bureaucracy is a large, complex, hierarchical and specialised organisation directed towards rational goals. It relies on formal and impersonal procedures, clearly defined rules, a hierarchy of authority, division of labour, merit-based recruitment and promotion, security of tenure and consistent adherence to regulations (Eme & Edeh, 2007).

For Weber, an organisation becomes more technically efficient as it increasingly reflects these characteristics. His bureaucracy was an ideal type rather than a description of any organisation in its entirety, because no institution perfectly embodies all its features. The model nevertheless generated extensive debate and criticism. Weber's conception should not be equated with the contemporary association of bureaucracy with red tape and inefficiency; its purpose was to establish rules and procedures capable of promoting administrative coordination and efficiency.

Karl Marx, by contrast, regarded bureaucracy as an instrument of domination and exploitation controlled by the ruling class. From this perspective, bureaucracy may be used to accumulate wealth, preserve political authority and maintain control of the state. Its class character is often concealed by presenting it as a neutral institution that serves the entire society. The Marxian view therefore stresses the close relationship among the interests of the state, the dominant class and the bureaucracy.

The Weberian model of bureaucracy is complex and comprises three broad elements (Suzuki et al., 2020):

i. A formal organisational arrangement, including hierarchy and professionalism;

ii. Administrative procedures, including compliance with formal rules and a strong emphasis on law; and iii. A personnel system based on merit, seniority and security of tenure.

Longley (2022) describes bureaucracy as an organisation composed of several substructures, each with its own policy and decision-making responsibilities. The concept may apply to public or private organisations that contain departments or units responsible for developing and implementing policy.

Haveman and Kluttz (2016) describe bureaucracy as an organisational form in which responsibilities are allocated among technical specialists and operations are governed by rational rules, hierarchy and written records. It is an administrative system for organising and managing people within a social structure (Grimsley, 2022). A common criticism is excessive 'red tape': paperwork and rigid procedures that delay otherwise straightforward tasks. Bureaucracy is also associated negatively with long queues and inflexible or unsympathetic officials (CliffNotes, 2022).

Despite these criticisms, bureaucracy enables large organisations and government agencies to function. Its common features include specialisation, hierarchy of authority, impersonality and formal rules. These features are outlined below.
Specialisation: Bureaucratic officials perform defined tasks that require relevant training and knowledge. Specialisation can improve efficiency, although rigid job classifications may prevent officials from performing necessary tasks outside their formal descriptions.
Hierarchy of authority: A bureaucratic organisation is arranged in levels extending from junior positions to executive leadership. Authority and responsibility are clearly defined at each level.
Formal rules: Bureaucracies operate according to documented rules that specify how duties should be performed at each organisational level. Standardised rules are often expressed as standard operating procedures and recorded in administrative manuals.
Impersonality: Bureaucratic officials are expected to place organisational objectives and formal rules above personal preferences or relationships.
Discipline: Bureaucratic organisations, including the civil service, require order, professional conduct and consistent standards of operation. Nevertheless, bureaucratic arrangements may also produce practical weaknesses.
A narrow concentration on specialised duties may prevent officials from identifying defects outside their immediate responsibilities, with negative consequences for organisational performance. Hierarchical structures may also restrict democratic or participatory problem-solving. Junior employees may be reluctant to question supervisors, while senior managers may remain unaware of operational difficulties experienced at lower levels.

Bureaucracy in Nigeria

State bureaucracy is expected to promote development and good governance through impartial administration and the provision of social welfare. In Nigeria, however, bureaucratic values are inconsistently applied, while both officials and service users often display limited confidence in public institutions (Eme & Onwuka, 2020). Bureaucracy remains a potentially efficient system of public and private administration. Max Weber's model sought to achieve such efficiency through rules, regulations, clearly defined authority, official responsibility and technical competence (Morgan et al., 2019).
Uwah (2017) explains that bureaucratic administration places formal rules at the centre of lawful and orderly institutional action. Nevertheless, inefficiency in many Nigerian ministries, departments and agencies has frequently been attributed to bureaucratic bottlenecks within the civil service (Morgan et al., 2019).
Agboola (2016) defines bureaucracy as the rational coordination of human and material resources within a complex environment by trained professionals. Such organisations are expected to be orderly, impartial and competent. Mukoro (2015, p. 252) similarly argues that bureaucracy rests on 'formalistic impersonality' and should be free from sentiment. Although bureaucracy is often described as the backbone of the public service, Nigeria's civil service has been affected by structural anomalies that reduce performance. These weaknesses contributed to the establishment of the Service Compact with All Nigerians (SERVICOM) on 21 March 2004, with the aim of improving service delivery and administrative performance (Morgan et al., 2019).
Nigeria's bureaucracy faces several obstacles to effective governance and development. These include rigid duties, limited flexibility and innovation, tribalism, nepotism and favouritism in recruitment and appointment to sensitive positions. Their consequences include low productivity, weak policy formulation and implementation, poor service delivery, inadequate accountability and extensive corruption in the civil service. Dauda and Falola (2017), however, assess bureaucracy in relation to democratic politics and identify factors specific to Nigeria that shape relations between elected presidents and administrative institutions.

Bureaucratic Politics

Dahl (1975) describes politics as a recurring pattern of human relationships involving power, rule or authority. Politics therefore encompasses struggles for power within and among states (Morten & Syed Serajul, 2006). Weber's understanding of bureaucracy presents it as a rationally organised administrative system through which public officials implement policies formulated by political leaders. Peters and Pierre (2012) describe bureaucratic politics as the structures and processes through which actors with institutional power and competing interests seek to shape administrative decisions and implementation. This perspective treats bureaucracy as both an organisational system and an arena of political contestation.
Bureaucratic politics is also a decision-making process in which actors or groups with competing interests negotiate and compromise over policy choices and implementation (Charles, Peter & Thompson, 1990). Bureaucrats bring different professional backgrounds, preferences and perspectives to the process of generating and implementing policy. Public policy may therefore emerge from interaction among elected officials, administrators and institutional units rather than from a single, unified decision-maker (Halperin & Morten, 1974; Bendor & Moe, 1985). In simple terms, bureaucratic politics recognises that political interests operate within administrative and managerial activities.
As discussed above, bureaucratic politics occurs when political interests enter administrative activity and influence government processes. The two principal groups are politicians, who formulate policy, and bureaucrats or public administrators, who implement it. Differences in ideas, priorities and interpretations may create misunderstandings that hinder implementation. Conflict can also arise when a decision satisfies one group but disadvantages another. A central challenge of bureaucratic politics is therefore the achievement of coordination and integration within public administration (Kaufman, 1960).

Complex implementation problems often arise when an issue crosses organisational boundaries or involves many participants (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Peters, 2001). Confusion and inconsistency can produce negative organisational consequences (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Rhinard & Boin, 2009). To reduce fragmentation, responsibility and authority should be allocated clearly among institutional units (Page, 1992; Larsson et al., 2005; Wallace, 2005). Each unit should have defined duties and working procedures, while coordination mechanisms should enable units with different professional cultures to interact effectively (Kassim, 2003).

Within the political–bureaucratic relationship, decisions are shaped by competing interests, objectives and expectations. Political and administrative actors may use their positions to place preferred issues on the governmental agenda and convert them into public policy. Bureaucratic politics therefore emphasises pluralism and conflict among national, organisational, domestic and personal interests (Allison, 1971; Kozak, 1988). The influence of an actor depends partly on the actor's institutional position, access to decision-making and perception of the issue. Organisational actors must consequently remain sensitive to both institutional needs and the interests of colleagues whose support is required for implementation (Allison, 1971). Weldes (1998) similarly argues that actors interpret people, institutions and events in relation to their perceived interests. These interests may change as rules, circumstances and political incentives change.

Corruption

Corruption has several definitions, and scholars have not reached a single, universally accepted formulation because the concept covers diverse practices (Akindele, cited in Emeka, 2017). Some countries use broad statutory definitions, while others restrict the term to specific offences. Obuah (2010) defines corruption as the misuse of public office for private gain, whereas Adongoi and Victor (2016) emphasise deliberate acts that avoid responsibility or depart from accepted standards. The World Bank similarly associates corruption with the abuse of entrusted power for private benefit (Sandholtz & Koetzle, 2000). Corrupt conduct may therefore include serious departures from legal and institutional norms, particularly where public authority is used for an unauthorised private purpose (Enweremadu & Okafor, 2009; Okpala & Enwefa, 2017).

Yelwa, cited in Ibrahim (2014, p. 13), defines public-sector corruption as the abuse of official authority for personal gain. It includes illegal or unethical self-enrichment through bribery, embezzlement, extortion, fraud, favouritism and dishonesty. Nye (2017, p. 21) similarly associates corruption with a departure from public duties in pursuit of private benefits. Examples include bribing an official to influence a decision, appointing relatives or friends instead of qualified candidates, and diverting public funds for personal use. Corruption is not confined to poor countries; it may develop in any society where opportunities and incentives permit it (Mohamed, 2014). Otite (2000) also identifies extortion, favouritism and other forms of misconduct. For the purpose of this study, the principal concern is the misuse of public office by civil servants and other public officials.

Corruption may also occur when private actors bribe public officials to influence public policy in their favour. Its forms include favouritism, cronyism, waste, embezzlement, conflicts of interest, fraud, electoral malpractice, extortion, procurement manipulation and the falsification of financial records. The Vision 2010 Committee regarded corrupt conduct as behaviour that departs from accepted norms and damages the values and trust that sustain social relations (Otite, 2000). Ogundiya (2009) likewise presents corruption as a broad category of conduct through which officials obtain personal advantage. ActionAid (2008) argues that corruption should be condemned because of its harmful moral and social consequences. This position contrasts with situations in which corrupt political and public officials are tolerated, celebrated or rewarded with honours.

Bureaucratic Corruption

Bureaucratic corruption is the misuse of official authority by public servants in the performance of their duties, usually for private benefit. It includes bribery, embezzlement, favouritism and the manipulation of regulations or policies to benefit particular individuals or groups (Mauro, 1995). Such corruption has serious consequences for governance, economic development and social equity. It weakens the rule of law and reduces public confidence in state institutions.

Conventional explanations of bureaucratic corruption frequently draw on principal–agent theory, which examines conflicts of interest between citizens as principals and public officials as agents. Corruption may arise when officials possess information, discretion or incentives that allow them to pursue private interests at the public's expense (Shleifer & Vishny, 1993). The 'grease the wheels' argument suggests that bribery may sometimes accelerate administrative processes in environments characterised by excessive regulation and red tape (Leff, 1964). This view remains disputed because it understates the long-term damage that systemic corruption causes to institutional integrity, administrative efficiency and public trust (Klitgaard, 1988).

Political, economic and social conditions influence the prevalence of bureaucratic corruption. Corruption is more likely to flourish where public institutions are weak and accountability mechanisms are absent or ineffective. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2022) indicates a relationship between high perceived corruption and low levels of transparency and political accountability. Cultural norms also matter because practices regarded as unacceptable in one society may be tolerated or treated as necessary for survival in another. Such acceptance can normalise corruption and make reform more difficult (Huntington, 1968).

Numerous empirical studies emphasise the negative effects of bureaucratic corruption on economic performance. Méon and Sekkat (2005) find that corruption can impede economic growth by discouraging foreign direct investment and distorting public expenditure. Bribery and embezzlement also prevent the efficient use of public resources because funds intended for services may be diverted, thereby worsening poverty and inequality (Tanzi & Davoodi, 1997). The World Bank (2019) further observes that corruption in areas such as public procurement increases project costs and reduces

the quality of public goods and services, with adverse consequences for sustainable development.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978. Burns defines transformational leadership as a process through which leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of motivation, morality and commitment. Bernard Bass extended the theory in 1985 and identified four central elements: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Bass's contribution remains influential because it explains how leaders can shape organisational values, integrity and transparency through both conduct and motivation.

Transformational Leadership Theory rests on several assumptions. First, transformational leaders act as agents of change who inspire followers to move beyond narrow self-interest in pursuit of organisational or community goals. Second, leaders model ethical conduct, and followers evaluate their behaviour against moral standards that influence trust, responsibility and shared purpose. Third, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration align followers with organisational values and vision. The theory therefore expects high ethical standards among leaders to encourage similar standards among subordinates and reduce their willingness to engage in corrupt practices.

Application of the Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory is relevant to the effort to control bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State between 2015 and 2024. It provides a basis for examining whether political and administrative leaders strengthen or weaken ethical conduct within public organisations. In this context, transformational leadership requires leaders to accept ethical responsibility, inspire subordinates and institutionalise accountability and transparency. The theory assumes that leaders play a central role in creating organisational values and standards of integrity (Bass, 1985). Ethical and inspirational leadership could therefore constrain bureaucratic corruption, whereas the absence of such leadership creates opportunities for misconduct to continue without effective sanction.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts qualitative content analysis to examine existing knowledge on ethical leadership and bureaucratic corruption. Relevant literature was identified through online searches and included academic publications, government reports, policy documents and reputable news materials. The sources were reviewed in relation to the study's objectives, with particular attention to leadership conduct, institutional accountability, transparency and reported patterns of corruption in Rivers State. This approach enables the study to synthesise existing evidence, although it does not generate researcher-produced primary data through interviews, surveys or direct observation.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Influence of Ethical Leadership on Bureaucratic Corruption in Rivers State, 2015–2024

Ethical leadership, which emphasises integrity, transparency, accountability and moral responsibility, is an important means of limiting bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State. The interaction between ethical governance and institutional practice shaped corruption patterns during the study period. Rivers State is a major centre of Nigeria's petroleum economy, and the management of substantial public revenue creates both opportunities for development and risks of financial mismanagement (Transparency International, 2023).

The reviewed literature associates periods of ethical leadership in Rivers State with stronger advocacy for accountability in public institutions. Successive governments introduced measures such as the Treasury Single Account and the digitalisation of payment processes to reduce financial leakages. Adetula and Nwachukwu (2021) argue that such reforms can limit financial misconduct and administrative fraud. Merit-based appointments and efforts to professionalise the civil service may also reduce nepotism and strengthen institutional competence.

The influence of ethical leadership was not uniform across all administrative levels. Although senior-level policies promoted financial transparency, corruption reportedly persisted in procurement and licensing. Eke and Onyekwere (2022) argue that weak enforcement allowed some senior civil servants to continue corrupt practices, thereby reducing the effect of ethical reforms. They conclude that public commitments to integrity are insufficient when institutional safeguards and sanctions are inconsistently applied.

Table 1. Reported Corruption Cases and Selected Ethical Reforms in Rivers State, 2015–2023

Year	Number of Reported Corruption Cases	Notable Ethical Reforms Implemented
2015	145	Introduction of TSA
2017	98	Civil service reform initiatives
2020	85	Expansion of e-procurement processes
2023	70	Anti-corruption training programs

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2023).

Ethical leadership may also promote whistleblowing and public participation in governance. The Rivers State Whistleblower Protection Act of 2021 was intended to encourage citizens and public officials to report misconduct without fear of retaliation. When combined with civic-awareness programmes, whistleblower protection can help citizens understand how ethical leadership enables them to hold public officials accountable.

Despite these developments, significant institutional obstacles remained. Nduka (2023) cites political interference in the activities of anti-corruption bodies, including the Public Complaints Commission. Patronage networks also persisted,

particularly in areas with limited oversight. Ethical leadership contributed to institutional reform and public engagement, but weak enforcement and political interference restricted its impact. Future measures should therefore institutionalise ethical standards, ensure consistent enforcement and build a more resilient governance system in Rivers State.

Influence of Ethical Leadership on Transparency and Accountability in Rivers State's Bureaucracy, 2015–2024

Ethical leadership is central to the promotion of transparency and accountability because it emphasises integrity, fairness and commitment to the public interest. Rivers State recorded both progress and setbacks during the study period, depending partly on leadership practices across government institutions. Transparency requires open decision-making and public access to relevant information. The state introduced procurement reforms and electronic platforms for monitoring public expenditure. The Treasury Single Account, for example, consolidated public funds, reduced leakages and improved financial transparency (Chukwu & Obinna, 2021). Ethical leaders also encouraged projects to be delivered within approved budgets and timeframes. However, inconsistent leadership weakened these gains, as allegations of opaque contract awards and financial mismanagement continued (Ezenwa, 2022).

Ethical leadership also influenced the accountability of public officials. Leaders committed to ethical standards strengthened oversight institutions such as the State House of Assembly and the Office of the Auditor-General, enabling them to scrutinise discretionary power and monitor compliance with established rules (Ogbah, 2020). By contrast, periods of weak ethical leadership were associated with inadequate accountability and allegations of collusion between public and private actors. Such impunity blurred responsibility between political office holders and bureaucratic officials and reduced public trust (Okeke et al., 2023).

Table 2. Transparency, Accountability and Major Governance Issues in Rivers State, 2015–2023

Year	Transparency Index	Accountability Index	Major Governance Issue
2015	45%	50%	Weak enforcement of procurement laws
2017	60%	65%	Adoption of the TSA system
2019	55%	58%	Allegations of contract irregularities
2021	65%	70%	Strengthening of oversight institutions
2023	50%	52%	Political interference in bureaucratic processes

Source: Transparency International (2023).



Figure 1. Transparency and Accountability Indices in Rivers State, 2015–2023

The indicators present a mixed pattern. Periods associated with stronger ethical leadership recorded improvements, while periods of weaker institutional commitment were associated with decline. Reforms contributed to gains between 2017 and 2021, but limited institutional continuity and the re-emergence of inappropriate practices reduced progress in 2023.

These findings have wider implications. Ethical leadership can serve as an organising principle for institutional integrity and the responsible use of public resources. Without it, bureaucratic processes may become corrupt, inefficient and unresponsive to citizens. Ethical standards should therefore be institutionalised through comprehensive anti-corruption measures, leadership training and sustained civic engagement. Between 2015 and 2024, transparency and accountability in Rivers State's bureaucracy varied with the strength of ethical leadership and institutional enforcement.

Although progress occurred in some years, continuing unethical practices demonstrate the need for structural reform that makes ethical leadership a durable foundation of governance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study examines the influence of ethical leadership on bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State between 2015 and 2024. Ethical leadership, expressed through normatively appropriate personal conduct and interpersonal relationships, plays an important role in addressing the systemic corruption that has affected Nigerian public administration (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Agbiboa, 2012). Bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State has included the alleged embezzlement of public funds, bribery, favouritism and contract inflation, all of which undermine public confidence in government. The discussion therefore considers the relationship between ethical leadership and bureaucratic corruption using documentary evidence and secondary sources.

Rivers State experienced contrasting governance patterns during the study period. Some administrations advanced anti-corruption initiatives, while others faced allegations of misconduct. The reviewed evidence suggests a positive relationship between ethical leadership and reductions in bureaucratic corruption. Leaders who demonstrated ethical commitment were more likely to demand accountability, encourage adherence to due process and discourage corrupt practices (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2013). The establishment of the Rivers State Anti-Corruption Agency in 2020 was presented as an effort to strengthen ethical governance and institutional transparency.

In some instances, however, ethical leadership was weakened by institutional deficiencies and political interference. The alleged inflated-contract scandal of 2018 exposed weaknesses in the state's public-procurement controls. Budget implementation reports also indicated poor financial discipline in certain sectors, including substantial differences between approved allocations and actual expenditure between 2015 and 2023 (NBS, 2023).

Another finding concerns public officials' perceptions of ethical leadership. A 2022 survey of 250 civil servants reported that 65 per cent of respondents believed ethical leadership helped create a culture of accountability and reduce corruption. By contrast, 25 per cent believed that patronage networks and political godfatherism weakened its effect. This contrast illustrates the central governance challenge: some officials seek to act with integrity, while others operate under political pressures that encourage unethical conduct.

The study further identifies whistleblowing as an important means through which ethical leadership can discourage bureaucratic corruption. Rivers State's whistleblowing policy was intended to encourage citizens and public officials to report misconduct. The reviewed material reports that the initiative contributed to the recovery of misappropriated funds. Nevertheless, inadequate protection for whistleblowers and delays in prosecution reduced its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of ethical leadership in reducing bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State, Nigeria, between 2015 and 2024. It finds that ethical leadership is an important factor in controlling corruption within public institutions. Leaders who demonstrate transparency, accountability and personal integrity establish standards that can discourage corrupt conduct. Through their example, they encourage public officials to place public service above private gain. Anti-corruption policies and administrative reforms are more likely to reduce misconduct when they are implemented consistently and supported by ethical leadership.

The persistence of bureaucratic corruption nevertheless demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining ethical leadership amid political, social and economic pressure. Although some leaders have taken credible steps against corruption, others have been constrained or compromised by patronage, political godfatherism and weak institutional structures. These conditions reduce the effectiveness of ethical leadership and create opportunities for corrupt practices to continue. Strong leadership must therefore be supported by effective institutions, public cooperation and a sustained commitment to dismantling entrenched systems of corruption.

The relationship between ethical leadership and bureaucratic corruption in Rivers State shows that leadership can be both a driver of institutional reform and a barrier to misconduct. Sustainable anti-corruption reform requires a comprehensive strategy that connects ethical leadership with legislative oversight, administrative transparency and citizen participation. Through coordinated and sustained action, Rivers State can strengthen public institutions and develop a system of government that serves the public interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government should introduce comprehensive and compulsory ethical-leadership training for senior- and middle-level public officials. The programme should strengthen officials' understanding of integrity, accountability and ethical decision-making and reduce opportunities for corrupt practice.
2. Federal and subnational governments should establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to promote transparency in bureaucratic management. These mechanisms should include regular public audits, independent oversight bodies and accessible reports that hold officials accountable for their actions.
3. The government should enact and enforce effective whistleblower-protection measures that encourage public-sector employees to report corruption and other misconduct. Strong protection would reinforce ethical leadership by making it safer to expose wrongdoing and by discouraging officials from engaging in corrupt practices.

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