


# Examining the interface between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa

**Author:**

Chinyeaka J. Igbokwe-Ibeto<sup>1,2</sup> 

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, College of Business, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka, Nigeria

**Corresponding author:**

Chinyeaka Igbokwe-Ibeto,  
ugochinyerecj@yahoo.co.uk

**Dates:**

Received: 04 May 2020

Accepted: 04 Mar. 2021

Published: 30 June 2021

**How to cite this article:**

Igbokwe-Ibeto CJ. Examining the interface between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa. *J transdiscipl res S Afr*. 2021;17(1), a874. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v17i1.874>

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**Background:** In every human organisation, there is bound to be conflict of ideas because everyone wants his or her viewpoint to take precedent over others. There are those who want to be on top of every situation irrespective of those involved or the issue at stake. However, a proactive bureaucratic leadership should be able to find a way out of these quagmires.

**Aim:** Within the framework of the strategic elite theory, this article examines the nexus between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa, as well as challenges confronting bureaucracy in the pursuit of public interest with specific reference to Nigeria.

**Method:** This article adopts a qualitative approach and is descriptive in nature, with the researcher setting out to illustrate the association that exists between the dependent and independent variables. Authoritative scholarly sources were reviewed during a desktop study. The purpose was to identify the relevant publications and apply them in the research.

**Results:** This article argues that whilst conflict generally is an inevitable outcome of human interactions. However, conflict is more common in a bureaucratic organisation where issues of power and influence are always a source of contention amongst the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). Therefore, resolving the basis for the existence of the MDAs that will ultimately inculcate in the bureaucrats a new worldview.

**Conclusion:** It therefore, concludes that there should be countervailing forces to put the bureaucracy on check. This includes: strengthening interest groups, the pursuit of institutionalism, ethical reorientation in the public service, amongst other measures. However, to achieve this, requires a critical mass of men and women of integrity, doggedly and ruggedly committed to Africa's project and ready to subsume their personal interests under that of the national interests.

**Keywords:** efficiency; development; leadership; management; service delivery.

## Introduction

Max Weber's<sup>1</sup> conception of bureaucracy was an ideal type: the type of organisation set up by modern government to carry out various specialised functions embodied in an administrative system. Max Weber did not expect that the system of administration he outlined could or should be rigidly applied or that it would be uninfluenced by specific historical or cultural context.<sup>2,3</sup> Bureaucracy, much as modern (scholars) admirers of the system would want to conceive it, is not a perfect system. It has its challenges that need to be constantly put in check in order to ensure that they do not negate or make it antiquated. The human factor in all these such as interpersonal relationships is crucial. No matter how well an organisation is crafted, without the human factor to control its operations, it may grind to a halt. That is why, of all the factors of production, the human factor (labour) is fundamental. It brings other elements to play in the process of ensuring that the organisation meets with the exigencies of the time, especially in a global system characterised by stiff competition and complex situations.

Some of the challenges modern organisations face are man-made. The reason for this is partly because of the unstable nature of man. The unstable variable nature of man makes it difficult to predict human behaviour. Whilst the behaviouralists have done an extensive work on this, the outcome has not been incontrovertible. The verdict remains that man is an unstable variable that cannot be easily predicted. This quality in every man has been brought to bear on their relationship with others in the workplace. More often than not, man's relationship with others is conflictual because of the pursuit of ends that are divergent and sometimes, irreconcilable. Max Weber was conscious of this fact, that is why in his articulation of the ideal type of bureaucracy, he notes that

its central precepts such as specialisation of roles, rationality and money amongst others are subject to the vicissitude of time and space.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in every human organisation, there is bound to be conflict of ideas, values and wants, because everyone involved in conflictual situations wants his or her viewpoint to take precedent over others. In addition, human beings have different drives. There are those who want to be on top of every situation irrespective of those involved or the issue at stake. But conflict between two and more persons in a workplace, if not properly handled, can cause damage of unfathomable proportion. Moreover, in the public sector where the public interest is involved, such situation should be identified and addressed with dispatch.

Like other forms of organisation, bureaucracy also has its fair share of conflicts in different areas and aspects of the organisation. Such conflict can be internal or external to it. From whatever angle it emanates, it should be dealt with as quickly as it rears its ugly head, for the public interest to be served. The debate on the question of what constitutes the public interest, remains the *raison d'être* of government everywhere. The more government pursues this goal, the more the stability, peace and progress we have in human society. Much of the conflict, crisis and violence in the world today are by-product of the failure of government to pursue the public interests doggedly. Whilst conflict may be unavoidable in formal bureaucracy, accommodation, bargaining and consensus remain the most enduring and effective means for settling such disputes. There are a number of studies that focus on bureaucracy and service delivery; however, not much has been documented on the relationship between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa. This article, therefore, seeks to examine the interface between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa with specific reference to Nigeria to fill the research gap.

To address the issues raised, this article is divided into seven parts. Aside from introduction, the first part explores the conceptual and theoretical framework. The second examines the nature of bureaucratic conflict. The third provides an overview of the methods of investigating bureaucratic conflict. The fourth discusses the significance of bureaucratic conflict. The fifth x-rayed the interface between bureaucratic conflict and public interest, whilst the sixth analyses challenges confronting formal bureaucracy in pursuit of public interest. The seventh part makes prescriptions for resolving the identified problems in the public interest.

## Methodology

This study, which is theoretical in nature, drew its arguments mostly from secondary data, which included, textbooks, journal publications and internet sources. Subsequently, relevant sources of this research were fairly and professionally scrutinised, understood and tested with the available

literature for the purpose of the research. It included scan-reading, comprehensive and critical reading and writing down ideas. Authoritative scholarly sources were reviewed, during a desktop study. The purpose was to identify the relevant publications and apply them in the research.

## Conceptual and theoretical considerations

Bureaucracy and its relevance in modern organisation, be it in the public and private sectors, have been a subject of intense academic debate. Perhaps the concept is more popular in its negative connotations than the positive ones. More often than not, it is used in pejorative terms. Yet, one cannot run away from its relevance in the management of modern organisation. This perhaps explains why there is definitional quagmire as to what the concept of bureaucracy actually represents. A representative sample of these views on the subject will illuminate the author's position on this subject better. Taking a holistic view of the concept 'bureaucracy', Dimock<sup>2</sup> posited that bureaucracy is the composite institution manifestations, which tend towards inflexibility and depersonalisation. The word composite is used by Dimock in this definition to bring in variables such as the tradition of the organisation and the spirit of its employees that together create an atmosphere that makes bureaucracy an institution.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'conflict' has no single clear meaning. Systematic reviews of the conflict literature by Air,<sup>4</sup> Emiola<sup>5</sup> and Fulmer<sup>6</sup> show a conceptual sympathy for, but little consensual endorsement of any generally accepted definition of conflict. Fulmer<sup>6</sup> in his classic review has illustrated tremendous variance in conflict definitions. He discovered a range of definitions for specific interests and a variety of general definitions that attempt to be all-inclusive. The concept of conflict can be viewed from many angles depending on the scholar's view point or worldview. But from a general perspective, conflict can be regarded as disagreement between two equal and unequal parties over an issue on which they hold divergent positions. Coser<sup>7</sup> in argued that conflict is a:

[S]truggle over values, claims to status, power and scarce resources which the aim of the opposing parties is not only to gain the desired value, but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate rivals.

This perspective takes a radical view of the concept of conflict in which competitors use every weapon at their disposal to undo or gain advantage over their competitor. When situated within the context of formal bureaucracy, conflict is the struggle for pre-eminence, power and control over resources of government, which more often than not, take the form of subtle competition amongst ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs).

Having noted in the course of this discourse that bureaucratic form of public organisation intends to move public administration from its traditional and charismatic

models, which were characterised by systems where Akhakpe points out:

[P]olicies of government were administered on the basis of norms that injected personalistic, ascriptive and other irrational considerations into the processes of administration. Government could not continue on this basis in the context of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

Max Weber sought to bring into public administration some of the key cannons of the enlightenment period and of the industrialising society such as specialisation, efficiency and effectiveness, rationality, impersonal, authority is exercised by administrators, only by reason of the office they occupy and not because of their age, family, wealth, wisdom or magical powers. The kind of administration system that Max Weber envisaged is already evolving, as bureaucratic organisation in its purest form is based on legal-rational system.<sup>1</sup>

Two crucial points can be deduced from the submission made here. Firstly, Max Weber wanted to move away from a system of administration in which powers to hire and fire are in the hands of certain demagogic leaders who do things based on their personal whims and caprices. Secondly, unlike the previous models of administration, occupants of official positions, do not only have certain rights, they also have certain obligations. These obligations, as argued here is to pursue and serve the public interests. Thus, the rights of bureaucratic leaders must of necessity coincide with the will or public interest of the citizens in the polity. Unless this is done, we boldly argue here that public administration cannot be efficient and effective.

This takes us to the issue of the public interest. Jean Jacques Rousseau was interested in a social contract that will bring about equality, representativeness and the general good. If a distinction can be made between the state and the people, Rousseau<sup>8</sup> argued:

There is between these two bodies, this essential alterative, that the state exists by itself, and the government only through the sovereign. This dominant will of the prince is or should be nothing but the general will or the law his force is only the public force concentrated in his hands, and as soon as he tries to base any absolute and independent action on his own authority, the tie that binds the whole together begin to be loosened. If finally, the princes should come to have particular will more active than the will of the sovereign and should employ the public force in his hands in obedience to this particular will, there will be so to speak, two sovereigns, one rightful and the other actual, the social union will evaporate instantly and the body politic would be dissolved.

It follows from the foregoing discussion that the government at whatever level should not have wills that are diametrically opposed to that of the people, if not, it would alienate or isolate them from it and the state. If the government wants to remain in power, it would want to rely on force, which if not curtailed or prevented may end up in the dissolution of the body politic. This is why authoritarianism threatens the very existence of a state because the people want freedom and

liberty but everywhere are in chains. Mummer Gadhafi of Libya and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe are a case in point. Many years of strongman rule and authoritarianism ended up in violence and subsequent demise of their regimes. Africa is in a cross-road today and public policies are ineffectual because there seems to be little convergences of interest between the governors and the governed because public interest means little to public officeholders.

Public interest could be defined as the common good that will benefit the whole community irrespective of status, sex, creed or ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> Policies of government should correspond with the public interest. Whilst debate may be intense on the means of achieving certain goals such as: reduction of budget deficit, removal of subsidies and taxes, seldom do we talk about the ends of these measures. Yet, the behavioural aspect to all these is very crucial. Unless it is factored into every process and made the key issue, we may compromise the very essence of policies and programmes of government. Whilst legislators and administrators would agree that governments need economic growth and stability to remain legitimate, the rule of the game is not often followed. Mclean and McMillan<sup>9</sup> provided two mutually exclusive and contradicting notions of the concept of public interest. The first conceives of it as 'the common interest of persons in their capacity as members of the public'. Here, it implied that there is an interest that all members of the society subscribe to or consider to be to their benefit. The second perspective, views public interest as 'the aggregate of the individual interest of persons affected by a policy or action under consideration'.<sup>9</sup> Public interest viewed from this angle opines that the interest of the people can be summed up and put forward at any given point in time as the public interest. Even where this is practicable, it will take tedious and long time to articulate and aggregate these interests of members of the body polity, which means that public policy will be continually delayed to the detriment of the public interest it intends to serve.

Bureaucratic conflicts hardly come to the public knowledge as they are covered in secrecy or officialdom. The members of the public only see these conflicts indirectly when policies and programmes of government are delayed or not implemented at all or turned out to be inefficient and ineffective. In either way, the public interest suffers as members of the public are left with poorly conceived and implemented public policies and development programmes. If not properly managed, bureaucratic conflict could lead to crisis, which can shut-down government. Therefore, one can deduce that it requires more manifestation of conflict and violence to establish a state of crisis. Conflict occurs mostly amongst the power elites be they in the bureaucracy, amongst the political executive or the legislators. Therefore, bureaucratic conflict is an elite and institutional centred issue. The elite theory gives us an understanding of the nature and character of this group of people and how they influence the policy process either positively or negatively.

In all political society or large scale organisations, the masses do not come together to decide or make decisions, only a few do. This designated few are called the strategic elite. The strategic elite theory states that society is governed not by voters or public opinion but by small group of wealthy persons. This view was ably marshaled by Wright Mill in the 1950s against the principle of political equity as proposed by the United States Constitution. His study shows that rather than having government by the people, it is the power elite that actually govern.<sup>10</sup> Robert Michael applied this theory to the study of modern bureaucratic organisations with specific reference to the German Social Democratic Party. His findings showed that elite groups who derived their powers and authority from well-honed organisational skills ran the party.<sup>10</sup>

This led Michael to advocate the now famous 'Iron Law of oligarchy'. He observed that as organisations become oligarchic or bureaucratized because of the fact that those in the top echelon of every organisation that has gained control of information, better skills and knowledge, naturally assume position of making decisions for the rest who are politically unsophisticated and almost always preoccupied with their private affairs. Therefore, those whose organisations are to survive abdicate powers to make decision to bureaucratic officials who govern in the name of the rest. Empirical evidence tends to prove this theory right particularly in developing countries. But the theory has not gone unchallenged.

The first major critique of the elitist theory comes from the pluralist. Both the elite and pluralist theorists agree that elitism is a ubiquitous phenomenon observable everywhere, either in the dispersion of power or influence over particular policies. But they disagree on the nature of the political system that produces them. The pluralists argue that no one individual or group can exercise power over the whole process of public policy. For the pluralists, the political system or the bureaucracy is too wide open, freewheeling and institutionally fragmented to allow for any such accumulation of power.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, what is obtained, for example, in the United States is not concentration of power but its diffusion. As a perspective pluralist put it,<sup>10</sup> the most important obstacle to social change in the United States is not the concentration of power but its diffusion if power was concentrated sufficiently, those who wish for change would merely have to negotiate with those who hold the power and if necessary put pressure on them. But power is so widely diffused that, in many instances, there is no one to negotiate with and no one on whom to put pressure.

Interest groups in Africa for instance, play some roles in policymaking, especially where the interest of their members is of paramount importance. Both political executives and bureaucrats, sometimes go out of their ways to negotiate with interest groups that are special in certain areas of policy. This is done to ensure the success of such policies once they are passed into law.<sup>2,11</sup> No government wants to be caught in

the web of policy failure, especially when huge financial involvement has been made into it. Sartori<sup>12</sup> argued that in practical terms there cannot be an iron law of oligarchy. What matters in contemporary times is not the form that organisations take but the interaction within them and how this can help achieve the goals of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, instead of looking inside an organisation, focus should be on the relations in the world of politics, between separate and competing organisations. It is this scenario that generates conflict and unless it is managed for the benefit of the majority, it may spell doom for the body politic.

### The nature of bureaucratic conflict

Conflict is a universal phenomenon as it is found everywhere: human beings interact to achieve certain goals. The formal bureaucracy is not an exception. In fact, given the enormity of its daily activities, it cannot but have some elements of conflicts either induced by deliberate actions or those that evolved in course of developing and implementing government policies and programmes.<sup>11</sup> Here, the article shall interrogate the why and how of this subject.

Formal bureaucracy is perhaps the most important institution of modern government. It is the engine room of the executive arm of government and over time has risen as the handmaid of the developmental aspirations of the modern state.<sup>2,11,13</sup> It has risen in accordance with the expansion of the activities of the executive branch of government. In spite of the increase of its workload, it manages to remain closely knit and maintains a high level of secrecy. Yet, it has had its own fair share of conflicts that occur frequently albeit, under official veil several of these conflict areas can be identified as follows.

Funding issues are as old as bureaucracy itself. Bureaucracies, particularly the public ones, have always sought to increase their budgets. They press and lobby to get budget increased from the political executive and the legislators: mostly through the annual appropriation bills. In this quest for more money or funding, they tend to have some advantages *vis-à-vis* the political executive and legislators.<sup>2</sup> These come from their possession of information and technical expertise. In some policy areas that are technical in nature, political institutions find it difficult to exert their influence and control because they do not have the time and energy to acquire the skills and knowledge required to deal with such technical matters, thereby allowing the heads of MDAs to enjoy immense influence and autonomy in such policy areas.<sup>11</sup>

Bureaucratic conflict may arise over the question of who controls the power of the purse. In order to survive, prosper and grow, within the bureaucracy, money is needed. Each MDA wants to be ahead of the other or at least not to be short-changed. Once the money is gotten, they seek to shield this from preying eyes within and outside the bureaucracy. As Guy<sup>2,14</sup> put it:

[T]he bureaucracy seeks money and the autonomy to spend it, while the political institutions seek control of their funds and to ensure accountability as to how it will be spent.



Formal bureaucracy is always on the look out to make sure political institutions such as the political executive and parliament do not get to control what is given.

Based on this discussion is the related question of autonomy over bureaucratic activities and actions particularly in the use of funds. Agencies may seek latitude in the way funds are spent so that they are not put under public spotlight. It speaks volume of the level of public accountability in government institutions.<sup>15</sup> Such latitude or autonomy could be positively deplored in the final analysis to serve the public interest. Another area that seeks autonomy is the area of policy. Bureaucrats might seek autonomy to make policy in a particular area without interference from other political institutions. This situation has persisted for long because other political institutions lack the will to checkmate such intensions by virtue of their lack of requisite expertise and information.<sup>2</sup> Yet, political institutions should find a way of regulating the autonomy of the bureaucrats to act because political institutions have their constitutional role to regulate policy and the implementation of policy. Moreover, they must be politically responsible for what happens to the country and they need to control policy if they are to be held responsible for it.<sup>14</sup> But, do they have the expertise, information and political will to do this? The answer appears to be in the negative.

Another area of bureaucratic conflict is in the exchange system within and outside the bureaucracy. Within the bureaucracy, information and communication flow may not be effective amongst the staff thereby creating feelings of alienation that may breed discontent. Proper communication is the key to organisational effectiveness because it helps to prevent rumour mongering and distortions of facts. The exchange relationship between the bureaucracy and political institutions is often conflictual. Whilst agencies could be said to have their own ideologies, which they hold tight to, political actors hardly have a policy-specific ideology.<sup>2</sup> This is not unrelated to the deficit of ideology in most of the political parties of this dispensation in Africa. Many political leaders simply do not have the background in the policy area to contribute much in the way of policy direction and the demands of their jobs often prevent them from developing such direction.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the widely acknowledged relative ignorance of political leaders in controlling or checkmating their administrative counterpart, has it come to a situation where the bureaucracy constitutes an alternative government? Guy<sup>14</sup> volunteered an answer when he opined that an impartial analysis of the situation would have to accept the argument that bureaucracies have by now acquired considerable political clout, even to the point of coming to dominate policy making in many modern political systems. According to Akhakpe<sup>2</sup> and Igbokwe-Ibeto,<sup>11</sup> developing cutting edge technology and competitive edge *vis-à-vis* other actors in the political domain, may go a long way in determining who calls the shot in such relationship.

Insofar as political actors still remain provincial in their roles and thinking, so shall the bureaucracies continue to amass the political clout to dominate and determine who gets what, when, where and how much. Where political actors cannot give policy direction, the public interests are at risk and bad governance pervades the entire political and socio-economic systems.

Also, bureaucratic conflict may emerge from personnel and welfare issues in the bureaucracy. Issues of appointment, promotion, transfer, discipline and incentives to work may cause strifes and bad blood amongst bureaucrats. Whilst the bureaucracy would want to be as representative as possible to reflect plurality of the state, often, issues of quota system tend to put the educationally advanced regions against the educationally less advanced ones.<sup>16,17</sup> In this circumstance, merit tends to be sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity. In the formal bureaucracy as in other type of bureaucracies, favoritism and nepotism are high. Some people get promoted, given cars, better offices, sent to foreign trips for training, whilst others are kept in one position for years, even when they have all it takes to move to the next level, travel for foreign or domestic training programmes or enjoy the prerequisites of their office. Therefore, who gets what, when and how is skewed in bureaucratic politics.

Also, cleavages and conflict could emerge from unsettled union matters. Labour-employers' relationship in Africa have persistently and consistently being frosty. This is partly because of the insincerity of governments to honour agreements reached with representatives of labour that would help sustain an atmosphere of industrial peace and harmony. The constant Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike in Nigeria that paralyses academic activities in the universities is as a result of failure to honour agreements. For example, university academics in Nigeria who are supposed to be conducting research on finding cure for the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have been on strike. The same applies to other unions. If government operates by lies, what then are children learning from the leaders of today? Leaders should show good examples to children who in turn should learn good virtues from them.

At the level of wage management government at different levels has not been able to determine what represent living wages for their workforce, yet they expect workers to demonstrate high moral rectitude in the discharge of their responsibilities. For example, in Nigeria, the N30 000 per month minimum wage, which is less than \$100 for public servants is ridiculous and the height of absurdity. Governments know that this take-home pay cannot reasonably manage workers' home for a month. Yet, they stick to this amount. A fraudulent government can only have fraudulent workforce.

According to Akhakpe,<sup>2</sup> structural and institutional incongruence are sources of cleavages and conflicts in the

bureaucracy. The point has been argued that structures and institutions developed from different scenarios cannot be used to solve or find solution to problems of different societies. As a result of this, most migrated institutions and structures from Western Europe could not operate efficiently and effectively through the use of force. This method of administering society runs against the historically and culturally tested method that hinge on devolution of powers and authorities to local authorities. Thus, if what was expected of the post-colonial State in Africa was modernisation as the trend suggests, it would mean the wholesale import of non-African scenarios and solutions.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it was believed that Africa could prosper only upon rejection of itself.<sup>18</sup>

Such organisational fixation has found resonance in the perennial feud between the generalist and specialist or professionals (staff-line) in the formal bureaucracy. This for a long time has been a subject of cleavage and conflict. For Ugoo<sup>19</sup> and Smith,<sup>20</sup> this conflict amongst the top echelon of the civil service came as a result of integration of the old secretariat of generalists' political officers with professionals in the executive departments, to fall in line with what is going on in the national political scene. This brought about the super imposition of generalists' administrators on the professionals in the executive departments of government.

The professionals such as doctors, engineers, architects amongst others, argue that they are equally qualified as their generalists' counterparts to rise to the position of permanent secretaries. But the generalists on their part posit that by virtue of their knowledge and training they are more qualified to head the ministries. If the culture in public organisation is virile and robust such separation would have been immaterial bearing in mind that there is a larger goal to pursue, which is the public interests.

This brings the article to the clash between individual bureaucratic values and the public interests. Although public servants are recruited to serve the public interests, values of bureaucrats that represent the interest of the bureaucracy tend to conflict with the common good.<sup>21</sup> For example, formal bureaucracies are supposed to pursue distributive justice as a goal. If they do this in practice, it will connect almost automatically with the people. However, failure to do this over time has resulted in formal bureaucracies failing to meet up with their responsibilities to the vast majority.<sup>11</sup> Bureaucrats are influenced by organisational values, which they have come to imbibe over time. This is kept in view by several methods including rewards and sanctions to induce their members to accept and act in accordance with organisationally determined values.<sup>22</sup> Agency official's decisions may be influenced by considerations to ensure agency survival, to increase its budget or to preserve its power and programmes against external control. These values may lead to conflict amongst agencies with overlapping functions.<sup>22</sup>

In all, there are however, personal values of bureaucrats over official ones. Man, as a self-interested being will always seek after his own preservation before any other consideration except if curtailed. As Anderson<sup>22</sup> puts it: bureaucrats or more specifically, decision makers may also be guided by their personal values or by the urge to protect or promote their own physical or financial well-being, reputation or historical position. To some extent, the public choice theorists are correct in arguing that official behaviour is driven by self-interest.<sup>2</sup> The point being made is that such interests are often put over and above bureaucracy and by implication the public interest thereby valuating or undermining the goals of the bureaucracy and the government it represents. Bureaucratic goals are sometimes pursued but not realised because of personal values of bureaucrats.

### Methods of investigating bureaucratic conflict

It is difficult to get to the root of bureaucratic conflict through interview of officials of the bureaucracy and political institutions. This belongs to the category of investigation known as action research. This method of investigating social phenomena has the advantage of adapting itself to variations that take place in the subject matter of investigation.<sup>23</sup> This approach to investigation belongs to the category of survey research where samples are taken on a case study, analysis made and findings are generalised.<sup>24,25</sup> However, this approach may not reveal much about bureaucratic conflicts because respondents have a way of writing down what they do not really mean when asked certain questions through questionnaires. Perhaps, the situation could be different in more literate societies.

A researcher may also use content analysis of views on bureaucratic conflict to get at who did what, when and how. However, in Africa, this is a veritable source of information on bureaucratic conflict as it presents the largely illiterate society with information to gauge actions of public officials. Also, one may be interested in looking at past decisions taken on a subject matter to determine who makes decisions about what issue, to understand whether decisions are made by one person and office or several persons and offices. This is important because as we are reminded that there is in every organisation an iron law of oligarchy. Yet, this approach is fraught with problem because there is the tradition of secrecy of views in the formal bureaucracy that may make it difficult to come out with something meaningful and tangible from this process. One thing is to agree to talk, the other is to be objective with the discussion.

A similar method is the attribution method. It consists of simply asking members of an organisation and knowledgeable individuals outside the organisation, where the locus of power lies in the organisation, who has the power of decision-making and the limit of such powers.<sup>2</sup>

### Significance of bureaucratic conflict

Bureaucratic conflict is not without its positive and negative aspects. There is the tendency to see conflict in general from

the negative perspective. But there are indeed, positivity's that could be harvested from every conflict. In this section, the article dwells on some details on both sides of the divide.

Conflict and conflict resolution constitute an important activity in bureaucratic organisation as well as forming major part of bureaucratic practices. Whilst conflict prevention may be a preoccupation of bureaucrats, it is not really a bad thing to have conflict in the bureaucracy or any organisation for that matter. At any rate, conflict in any human collectivity has come to stay. It cannot be completely avoided or resolved.

Conflict can be costly to the bureaucracy in terms of turnover, inability to carry out a programme or project, waste of (human and materials) resources. Sometimes the effects of conflict are difficult to quantify at physical and social cost. One may argue that the slow pace of nation-building and national development can be attributed to such cleavages and conflicts. Yet, certain benefits could be derived from bureaucratic conflicts. According to Akhakpe,<sup>2</sup> some of these benefits include: innovation in terms of new techniques and technologies, bottom-top communication, more accountability and proper use of funds. What this amounts to is that, a good fight must lead to a worthwhile or meaningful change. Therefore, it can be said that whatever may be the tangible or intangible benefits of conflicts, organisations always attempt to resolve such conflicts. Whatever may be the effect of bureaucratic conflicts, a good deal of conflict resolution requires negotiation, bargaining and compromise. All these are needed because the stake in bureaucratic conflict could be very high and its outcome may affect not only the life and careers of individuals but also the existence of agencies and substance of public policy. In bureaucratic conflict, the personality of bureaucrats is very paramount to the nature and character of formal bureaucracy. What then is the interface between bureaucratic conflicts and public interest? This question becomes germane taking into cognisance that formal bureaucracies *ab initio* are created to discharge certain functions and responsibilities on behalf of governments at different levels.

### **The interface between bureaucratic conflict and public interest**

Bureaucracies in developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are expected to play pivotal roles and responsibilities in fast-tracking or jump-starting the development of their countries. At independence, in most of these countries, the formal bureaucracy was expected to champion the overall goal of social change. These expectations were well intended and placed on the door steps of this special corps of servants of the state because of the training, experience and expertise they possessed. No other organisation and institution could rival this unique organisation in terms of its composition.

The colonial administration in most of the former colonies suffered retardation in virtually all aspects of human lives. At independence, therefore, the burden fell almost

automatically on this special corps of servants of the state whose fundamental basis of existence is to help realise the goals of national development and nation-building in their various ramifications.<sup>2,13</sup> To this end, government's foray into various aspects of human life in the wake of its statist policies and programmes have at the back of their mind the overall goal of achieving public interest at all times. It is, therefore, axiomatic that the public interest should be at the heart of every activity, actions and inactions, and programmes of the bureaucracies. It can be argued that the bureaucratic conflicts this article has elaborated on, should essentially aim at, or concern itself with how to further the common good or public interests.

Although, the subject of public interests remains one of the contested issues, with lack of agreement of what actually it is or should entail. In substantive terms, scholars such as Akhakpe,<sup>2</sup> Lane,<sup>26</sup> Otite<sup>27</sup> and Rekosh<sup>28</sup> are still divided over what constitutes the public interest. A conservative view posits that whatever comes out from political struggle or better still, bureaucratic conflict, be it policy or other related issues, is in the public interest. This argument states that if all groups and persons are able to take part in these struggles which in a practical world is not possible, then the public interest would be served. From another angle, public interest is seen as a myth by which many public policies, although selfish are regarded as being in the public interest in order to make them publicly acceptable.<sup>22</sup>

What then constitutes public interest? Redford<sup>11</sup> in volunteered three approaches to the question. The first is to concentrate on policy area that is replete with conflict amongst group interests. For the struggle amongst groups to get to certain position, it should not be who is pushing what but what matters is, whether or not what is finally achieved serves the common good or the general will. The public interests can be seen as those interests widely and continually shared, for this reason, they are said to be in the public interest. The campaign of many for world peace, clean air, drug control and fight against terrorism are in the public interest. The third perspective to the issue of public interests is to look at the need for organisation and its procedures in representing and balancing interests, bring about compromise and put whatever is reached in the process into effect.<sup>22</sup> In this approach, emphasis is on the process of arriving at a goal or need, not really its content. People are likely to look at and judge the end product of a programme, law or policy on the basis of the path it followed rather than what it entails.

The term public interest is something of a subterfuge used by those in official positions to perpetrate actions that are in their interest.<sup>11</sup> This problem is thrown up by the unspecific nature of the term 'public'. Given the ambiguity that surrounds the term, alternative form of the relevant public is proposed. Even where such term can be provided, it is impossible in practice to identify where the public interest lies.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, the myth surrounding the concept 'public interest' makes it all the more iconic in government cycle.

Therefore, the question of whether an action or inaction, activity or even policy is in the public interest can be put to rest by assessing the potential gains and losses, which might follow from it.<sup>9</sup> This point is further driven home by the view that when pressure groups lobby heavily on behalf of an issue for which there is little popular support and which bears little, if any, obvious relationship to the public interest, the policy process, programmes, actions, activities of bureaucrats is likely to be corrupted.<sup>10,11</sup> Perhaps, this is a mild way of articulating the relevance of public interest in the actions of bureaucrats. Establishing a more comprehensive and causal connection between bureaucratic behaviour and public interest, Almond<sup>29</sup> argued that without such democratic aggregation, suppression of dissent leads to injustice and the frustration of the excluded, the corruption of the included and eventually to violence and greater instability.

A cursory examination of extant literature on the issues under investigation suggests that much of the infraction between government and the civil society is often caused by failure of the government to put in the front burner, the public interest as the guiding principle of good governance. In a democracy, this imperative is constantly put in the public domain where decision makers are constantly reminded of the need to pursue the common good. The fact that this has not always been the case in Africa takes the article straight to the impediments facing bureaucracy in pursuing the public interest in Africa.

### **Challenges confronting bureaucracy in pursuit of public interest**

The pursuit of public interest, whether heuristically and normatively conceptualised, remains the fundamental basis of modern government. It was for this reason, Max Weber advocated for a system that is devoid of human manipulations and whose goals are devoid of uncertainty.<sup>21</sup> The legal-rational prescriptions of bureaucracy, if followed will bring about faithful actualisation of bureaucratic goals, which represent the core values of the modern state: security, freedom, equality and liberty, provision of social welfare services, amongst others.<sup>13</sup> These goals could be said to represent some of elements of the public interest.<sup>1</sup> In practice, however, these aspirations, principles or philosophies of the state remain far-fetched. The African continent has for long been confronted with intractable crises and conflicts, failed expectations of the people for progressive improvement in their material well-being, to mention but a few of these assaults on the people they swore to serve. In this section, the article attempts to highlight some impediments to efforts by the bureaucracy to realise the public interest.

In Africa, public officials are mostly driven by materialism. The rat-race for wealth is so intense that those involved are willing to go to an absurd level, like swearing in a shrine publicly or going nicked before it, just to lay their hands on the prize called power. For this reason, elite competition is

almost zero-sum except for the privatisation of bureaucrats' heritage.<sup>2</sup> The premium placed on power and status end up subjugating or subsuming bureaucratic goals under personal interest of bureaucrats.<sup>11</sup>

Political institutions such as the executive and legislators cannot do much in terms of control because they are birds of the same feather. Even when they are willing, they are again limited or constrained by access to information, technical abilities and expertise. The bureaucrats by reasons of their expert knowledge, access to information and experience are able to avoid control and influence from outside thereby sacrificing the sacred goals of the bureaucracy for personal aggrandisement – money, agency control and status symbol.<sup>2</sup> All these compromise the public interest. It is little wonder that bureaucrats are defined in pejorative terms by members of the public.

Although the present administrative system in Africa predated the modern western democracy, the political system has not been able to rise up to the challenge of bringing formal bureaucracy under its control and influence. Several attempts at bureaucratic reforms in Africa have failed to bring about modern democratic practices.<sup>2</sup> It suffices to say that many years of military/authoritarian rule stunted the growth and development of democratic culture that would have put political institutions at par, if not above formal bureaucracies in Africa.

The calibre or quality of staff and training that bureaucrats received in recent times has become a subject of concern to all stakeholders. For a long time, the formal bureaucracy has not kept up with technological movement and innovation across the world. Brain drain in Africa has depleted the public sector of some of its best hands. Primordial sentiments in Africa has made it difficult to recruit the best hands in the society,<sup>21,30</sup> even as the educational system continues to produce half-baked graduates from a demoralised tertiary educational system.<sup>31</sup> Matters are made worst by the disdain with which training is approached by public servants. Many of them cannot see the essence of such exercise when it cannot elevate their material well-being. Definitely a depleted, demoralised and ill-equipped formal bureaucracy cannot mid-wife policies and programme that will serve the public interest.<sup>21</sup>

Surely, bureaucratic leadership is the key to the realisation of the public interest. No matter the unpredictability of the time and the uncertainty in public policy implementation, a proactive bureaucratic leadership should be able to find a way out of these quagmires to achieve the public interest. Bureaucrats only need to show that they adhere to the rules and regulations of the game. They should not see themselves as ethnic, religious or sectional representatives but chief servant leaders who are ready to uphold the sanctity of the laws. But ethnicity, religious bigotry, sectional inclinations and clientelism have invaded the bureaucracy to the



detriment of the public interest.<sup>2</sup> Having identified some of hiccups to bureaucracy's pursuit of the public interest. In what follows, the article shall attempt some prescriptions or remedial steps to ameliorate the situation.

### **Bureaucratic conflict and public interest: The way forward**

It can be argued that without conflict, the elite itself will be superfluous. Whilst the essence of elite interaction is conflictual, the question to be answered is how these interactions can be maintained without causing havoc to the public interest. Firstly, the negative elite political culture in Africa must change. Negative vices such as: corruption, clientelism, ethnicism, religion and parochialism should give way for positive elite political culture. This provides the basis for understanding political allocation and change for predicting the degree of stability in the system.<sup>2</sup> As LaPalombara<sup>3</sup> has argued:

[T]he political sub cultures are important in part because they provide a particular kind of learning for elite and masses that belong to them and they reinforce this learning through a variety of on-going organisation and experience.

It is crucially important that democracy that is just gaining ground in Africa be consolidated. This is vitally important to allow for the learning process to be internalised and embedded in the elite and masses alike. The best way to perfect a system is to continually work on it. The advanced democracies did not get to where they are by chance. It took them years of falling and rising again to get to where they are today. The elite and populace need to be patient to arrive at that matured stage of democracy where relapse or breakdown is almost impossible. The sure way of getting there is to develop a democratic rule characterised by bargain and compromise, accommodation and tolerance.

Elite in general and bureaucratic elite in particular occupy a central position in the life of every regime in political power. They are to be seen as role models by the masses worthy of emulation. The nature of elite-mass relationship is critical for the development of Africa. Whilst the people always inclined to follow the bureaucrat's judgement as to the inclined direction public policy and developmental programmes should take, bureaucrats on their part should carry them along by putting their interests in the back of their minds in all they do. As Otite<sup>27</sup> puts it: the elites in general '... are capable, if not also expected to create new values, new insights, new ideas and new orientations in the process of consolidating their influence on the masses'. But these innovative roles carved out for the elite can only rob positively on the masses if they are based on the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

Also, it is imperative to note that there are countervailing groups in civil society that are able to put public servants in constant watch, security and checks to prevent them from derailing from their motive for being an elite corps of public officials brought together to pursue the national interest or

public good.<sup>11</sup> These organisations in the public and private realm have grown exponentially. But they are yet to have that organisation and discipline to sustain them over time. But this can only get better by improving on what they do, particularly improving the relationship and interactions with pressure groups, particularly in the area of lobbyist's activities and policy advocacy.

At this critical juncture in the African evolution and developmental processes, Africa requires a critical mass of men and women of integrity, doggedly and ruggedly committed to the African project. In this mission, they should be ready to subsume their personal interests under that of the national interests. What Africa lacks are men who will elevate the national interest over and above that of the personal interest.<sup>2</sup> It would be wrong to assume that this change of attitude by public officeholders could come with the wave of the hand or wishful thinking. To get to this state of being, other factors must come to play, such as: resolving the basis for the existence of the African states that will ultimately inculcate in the people a new worldview of Africa and its organising philosophy.

Modern political systems are surely predicated on institutionalism as the formal channel for conducting government affairs. Anderson<sup>22</sup> saw institutions as partly, 'a set of regularised patterns of human behaviour that persist over time and perform some significant social functions or activities'. Their longevity and established rules and regulations give its operators values and belief in them that can help stabilise and give legitimacy to its operators and members of the society. The respect for institutional rules keeps their operators within check and provides a framework for assessing their performance. Overtime, the study of institutions as basis for understanding the political system including, of course, the bureaucracy has undergone changes. From the study of its legal powers, formal structures, functions and activities, amongst others, emphasis is now on its pattern and processes concentrating on behaviours of its actors and how this helps to realise or negate their goals and mandate. Therefore, respect for and value of institutions will go a long way in keeping bureaucrats on track and faithful to their calling as a group assembled by the state to bring about social change in the society.

### **Conclusion**

The article has examined extensively the issue of bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa with an attempt at clarifying the intellectual cobweb surrounding bureaucratic conflict and public interest. In addition, searchlight was also beamed on the theoretical framework for a better understanding of the concepts under analysis. Thus, the strategic elite theory has been examined as postulated by scholars. An attempt has also been made to establish a nexus between bureaucratic conflict and public interest in Africa.

The article concludes that whilst conflict generally is an inevitable outcome of human interactions. However, conflict is

more prevalent in a formal bureaucracy where issues of power and influence are always in contention amongst the MDAs. At the centre of bureaucratic cleavages and conflicts are the questions of money, more money, status, influence, labour relations and self-aggrandisement. Although efforts are often made to investigate causes of these conflicts, secrecy embedded in bureaucratic activities makes it difficult for researchers or members of the public to lay their hands on what the issues really are, with a view to finding lasting solution to them.

However, certain heuristic and normative investigations have revealed that bureaucrats wield enormous influence and power over other political institutions such as the political executive and legislature. This virtue of the bureaucrats is borne out of the superior information at their disposal in addition to their expert knowledge and experience. In all this, they must keep in view the public interest for which they are brought together and which they swore to serve, protect and defend at all times. But 'if wishes were horses, beggars would ride'. Therefore, there should be countervailing forces to put the bureaucracy in check. This will include: strengthening interest groups, the pursuit of institutionalism, ethical reorientation in the public service, amongst other measures. Whilst the goals of governments and organisations maybe closely related, the pursuit of these goals must be done in such a way that public interests are built into the process.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the almighty God for the knowledge and wisdom given to him. He cannot forget his immediate family members for their support and encouragement during the period of this study. He is also grateful to his PDRF host Prof. Nel-Sanders of the School Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa and his colleagues at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Nigeria, and to all authors whose works were consulted, which have been duly referenced.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## Author's contributions

C.J-I.I. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received funding from the University of Johannesburg.

## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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