

**COMMITMENT TO EXCEL AS A MAGISTRATE:  
TRANSPARENCY, ETHICS AND CODE OF CONDUCT**

BY

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**PROTOCOLS**

**INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2016, I presented this paper titled: "Commitment to excel as a judicial officer: transparency, ethics and code of conduct" at the 'Refresher Course for Judges'. It was during that presentation that I understood that I was to make a similar presentation at this conference. The question then was whether I could present the same paper to magistrates that I presented to judges. I didn't need to look far to find the answer. The Black Law Dictionary 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, at pages 848-849 defines a 'judicial officer' as:

'A judge or a magistrate. The term in popular sense applies generally to any officer of a court but in the strictly legal sense applies only to an officer who determines causes or renders decisions in a judicial capacity. One who exercises judicial functions. ADAMS V STATE, 214 IND 603, 17 NE. 2<sup>nd</sup> 84. A person in whom is vested authority to decide causes or exercise powers appropriate to a court.'

This is in line with the definition in the 'Code of conduct for Judicial Officers', which amongst others 'includes the holder of a similar office in any inferior court whatsoever'. These definitions are not in conformity with the definition of "judicial officer" in the 1999 Constitution, Section 318 of which does not recognize members of the lower bench as judicial officers. Be that as it may since we are here dealing with ethics and code of conduct in this presentation the inconsistency rule is inapplicable. We therefore adopt the inclusive definition of the Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers which recognizes magistrates as judicial officers. This being the case it is appropriate to represent an edited version of this paper to you

The large increase in the number of judicial officers across the country in the last decade, both at the lower and upper benches, though a welcome development must increase the possibility of more ethical issues for the judiciary. In this political period where lobbying and patronage constitute a major problem even in

judicial appointments, it is not a surprise that some undesirable elements may have found their way into the system.

Whether we like it or not as judicial officers, we live in an era when the judiciary has come under increasing public scrutiny. We cannot deceive ourselves as being beyond reproach. We admit that the administration of justice is one of the cardinal functions of civil society and it is for this purpose that judicial officers are entrusted with wide powers. The exercise of these powers has dramatic effects upon lives and fortunes of citizens who appear before us. Such citizens would not wish that such power is reposed in anyone whose honesty, ability or personal standards are questionable. It is important therefore that we use every opportunity at our disposal to discuss the principles of conduct by which we consider ourselves bound. This is why I think the effort of the NJI to include the problems of ethics in every conference is commendable.

Before the evolution of a formal code of conduct for judicial officers in Nigeria, not surprisingly, we followed the British example of unwritten rules of ethics. In the light of growing breaches and the effect of such breaches on the image of the judiciary, judges at the 1993 ALL NIGERIA JUDGES CONFERENCE in Port Harcourt adopted a resolution for a written code of conduct. This gave birth to the Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which was adopted at the 1997 ALL NIGERIA JUDGES CONFERENCE and now in force.

We have had the written Code of conduct since 1997/1998. It is worth reflecting why the existence of the code has not eliminated incidents of misconduct and corruption on the bench or even reduced its occurrence. On the contrary there is not only an

apparent increase of these incidents but also a current heightened public discontent with the judiciary. What then is the problem? One possible and ready answer can be found in the maxim that a society deserves the judiciary it gets. In other words, since the society is corrupt and the judiciary is part of the society, it cannot escape from what obtains in the larger society. This standpoint is not only defeatist but loses sight of the role of law as an instrument for social change. What this means is that lawyers, including judicial officers must always strive to be above board. They must act as the vanguard for change in society. The indispensable attributes of a judicial officer include integrity, impartiality, honesty, transparency and the fear of God.

The absence of the fear of God may be another major reason why the existence of the code has not done much to change the attitude of judicial officers. The two Holy books: the Quran and the Bible emphasize this attribute of the fear of God in a judge:

“O ye who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, or your parents or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich and poor; for God best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts) lest, ye swerve, and if ye distort (Justice) or decline to do justice, verily God is well acquainted with all that you do”. (The Holy Quran Chapter 4 V 16 and Yusuf Ali, The Holy Quran Text Translation and Commentary surah IV Vs 135)

And

“Appoint judges.....these men are to judge the people impartially. They are not to accept bribes, for gifts blind the eyes even of wise and honest men, and cause them to give wrong decision”. (Deut 16: 18-19)

The two major religions in Nigeria are therefore agreed on what the quality of a judge should be. In other words from time immemorial it was recognized that judges need to have special qualities different from other members of society. This is necessary in view of the powers they wield, including the power of life and death as well as incarceration. Freedom of movement is one of the fundamental human rights.

The theme of this conference: “Promoting Judicial Performance through Innovations and Reforms” recognizes the need for innovation and reforms. The old ways have not proved effective.

I intend to approach this presentation in the following format:

1. Ethics and Transparency;
2. The Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers;
3. International Development on Judicial Ethics with particular reference on the Bangalore Principles;
4. Constraints on efficacy of the code and

5. Commitment to excel by judicial officers.

## **ETHICS AND TRANSPARENCY:**

Lamont in his book "The Principles of Moral Judgement and Analysis of Moral ideal" defines ethics as.

"Facts on which we base any theory of the principles implied in moral judgement must be those judgments themselves. We shall be concerned not so much with the right and wrong behavior of men as with judgements passed upon that behavior with respect to its right".

The Black's Law Dictionary 6<sup>th</sup> Edition page 553 defines ethics as:

"Professionally right or befitting; conforming to professional standards of conduct".

In simple language, good ethical behavior means doing the right things and avoiding the wrong things or avoiding the appearance of doing the wrong things.

Judicial ethics is almost as old as civilization itself. In Exodus 18:21-22, we read what Moses' father in law Jethro had to say when he advised the former to reduce his workload by appointing judges:

"..... Moreover, choose able men from all the people such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe

and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and tens. And let them judge the people at all times....”

These four attributes: ‘to be able’, ‘fear God’, ‘trustworthy’ and ‘hate a bribe’ have no doubt formed the bed rock of the notion of judicial ethics. Judicial ethics therefore represent the minimum standards of behavior expected of a judicial officer in and out of the Court room.

Judicial ethics has a direct bearing on transparency. Both impact directly on the rule of law and administration of justice. This is the significant function of the judiciary. People’s faith and confidence in the judiciary is anchored on the expectation that it will administer justice in strict compliance with judicial ethics and code of conduct.

## **CODE OF CONDUCT**

As pointed out earlier this code has been in existence for almost two decades. It consists of three main rules. Rules 1 and 3 cover the ‘off the bench activities’ while Rule 2 covers the ‘on the bench activities’. I do not intend to discuss the rules in detail. The code has been thoroughly discussed in previous conferences of NJI especially the All Nigerian Judges’ Conferences. For those of you who want a fuller understanding of the code I advise that you liaise with the NJI to buy (if you cannot get it free) past publications of the conference proceedings

I would however like to speak to one or two of the issues covered in the rules that are a bit fluid and some that are not there which perhaps ought to be.

### **ACCEPTANCE OF GIFTS:**

The rule about gifts has been criticized for lack of clarity. It prohibits judges from 'asking or accepting gifts for things done or omitted to be done in the discharge of their duties.' This would appear to leave the question open that judges may accept gifts from anyone provided it is not related to the 'discharge of their duties'. Secondly, the rule also allows judges to accept gifts or personal benefits from 'relatives or personal friends to such extent and on such occasions as are recognized by custom'. Again this seems far from satisfactory. This leaves it exceedingly difficult to hold any judge to any level of accountability in relation to any abuse of such a rule.

A reference to judges in the Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers and in this presentation includes magistrates. This informs why in exercising civil jurisdiction you are referred to as district judges.

I think the rule relating to gifts should be given closer scrutiny and made more explicit for the avoidance of doubt.

It has also become the practice of some of our learned brothers (this includes sisters) to use their official letter headed papers to send invitations senior lawyers and other persons for purely personal events such as weddings of their children or wards.

This in my view is wrong. It is an invitation to treat. It should not be permitted.

A major issue of concern is the practice of judicial officers whether serving or retiring engaging in book launches. The practice in my view has become fraudulent. People with no credible academic or writing credentials suddenly become authors and claim to author books about judges. These are launched in ceremonies to which senior lawyers and their clients or politicians are invited as chief launchers or donors. The practice is unethical and should be condemned. The NJC should sanction any judicial officer found to engage in this. Any book written on any person should be offered to the public through normal channels.

These two scenarios may not be seen to be as applicable to magistrates as they are to judges. But it is relevant because in some jurisdictions magistrates wield a lot of power, especially in communities where there are no high courts but only magistrate courts. Also the magistracy provides a large pool from which appointments to the higher bench is drawn. It is therefore appropriate to draw attention to some of these concerns.

### **CHIEFTANCY TITLE:**

The Rule prohibits a Judicial Officer from accepting a chieftaincy title while in office. My only concern on this is that the NJC seems to operate double standards. There have been occasions where serving judicial officers received chieftaincy titles witnessed by

senior members of the bench. Such double standards do not augur well for the efficacy of the code.

This may not apply directly to magistrates but it is indirectly relevant. There may be a few of you who are academically inclined and may wish to put your experience into writing and launch it before you retire or get appointed to the higher bench.

### **MEMBERSHIP OF CLUBS, ESPECIALLY GOLF CLUB:**

Hon. Justice R.N. Ukeje, Chief Judge FHC (RTD) in a paper she wrote raised the issue of the propriety of Federal High Court Judges playing golf daily at the club house. Her concern is based on the ground that the personalities who play golf are those whose cases go before the Federal High Court either in their individual or corporate capacities. I throw this up for discussion but only wish to observe that golf clubs operate almost like a cult. It may therefore be difficult to impartially decide cases involving club members.

I think this applies to magistrates as well. You are closer to the people dealing more with the minor offences/misdemeanors. You should therefore be careful of not only the company you keep but also the organizations you join. Unlike judges you are lucky to have a national umbrella organization, Magistrates Association of Nigeria, (MAN). Under that you can organize activities that give

you opportunities to socialize or recreate exclusively from the general public.

Maybe the Research Department of the NJI can be mandated to do research for the NJC to come up with periodic activities that should be added to the code of conduct.

## **THE BANGLORE PRINCIPLES ON JUDICIAL CONDUCT 2002:**

Judicial corruption is not exclusive to Nigeria. It is a worldwide phenomenon even though more widespread in developing countries. In order to set international standards, the United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention in conjunction with the 10<sup>th</sup> UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offence and the Judicial Group on Strengthening Judicial Integrity organized a first meeting in Vienna in 2000. This Judicial Group on Strengthening Judicial integrity comprised of Chief Justices of different countries including our former CJN Hon. Justice M.L. Uwais. Our Code of Conduct was among the codes considered in preparing the draft principles. There was a second meeting of the group in Bangalore in 2001 in which the former CJN also attended. The Bangalore principles are a product of these meetings and a round table meeting of Chief Justices of some Civil Law Countries. These principles are designed to provide guidance to judges and to afford the judiciary a framework for regulating judicial conduct. They are also intended to assist members of the Executive and Legislature, lawyers and

the general public in general to better understand and support the judiciary.

These Principles have been accepted by different sectors of the global judiciary and by international agencies. They have also been recognized by bodies such as the International Commission of Jurists and American Bar Association. Countries like England and Wales have incorporated the principles as guides to enhance their terms and conditions for the appointment of judges. The UNHRC endorsed the Principles in 2003. The UNSEC in 2006 in its Resolution invited Member states to encourage their judiciaries to take the Bangalore Principles into consideration when reviewing or developing rules with respect to the professional and ethical conduct of its members.

Hon Justice Uwais, CJN (rtd) in his keynote address at the All Nigerian Judges Conference, 2011 informed the gathering that the Code of Conduct which was due for revision will be revised to accommodate the Bangalore Principles. This is almost six years now. Nothing has been done and I am not sure who has the mandate to do this. It is however important in keeping with international best practices to incorporate the Principles in our Code of Conduct. A review at this time will also give the judiciary an opportunity to include some new issues that are peculiar to Nigeria which have come up since the Principles were adopted. The sooner this is done, the better as it shows the proper goodwill not only to secure the independence of the judiciary but to foster her integrity.

It is perhaps necessary to inform this gathering that at the refresher course for judges when this paper was presented, the Chief Judge of Ekiti State informed us that the NJC, of which he is a member had almost concluded work on the new Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers. We were all surprised that such an exercise was taking place without the knowledge and active involvement of judicial officers. My view then, is that the draft code should be subjected to a workshop comprising different segments of judicial officers for their input so that they buy into the process. They will then have a sense of ownership which will make such a code more effective. This still remains my view.

The six principles enunciated by the Bangalore Principles of Judicial conduct are:

1. Judicial Independence, which is a pre-requisite to the Rule of Law and fundamental guarantee for fair trial.
2. Impartiality, which is essential to the proper discharge of the judicial office.
3. Integrity, which is essential to the proper discharge of the judicial office.
4. Propriety and the appearance of propriety, which are essential to the performance of all of the activities of the judge.
5. Ensuring equality of treatment to all before the courts, which is essential to the due performance of the judicial office.

6. Competence and diligence, which are pre-requisites to the due performance of judicial office

## **CONSTRAINTS ON THE EFFICACY OF THE CODE**

It is imperative that a Judicial Officer given responsibilities to sit in judgement over others must be seen as one who can be trusted to be fair, just and upright in the performance of his duties. In order to maintain this integrity, the Judicial Officer needs to be guided by certain ethical rules and code of conduct. This is what the NJC provides in the form of Code of Conduct. The question is, is this enough? In pondering on this question the former Interim President, Chief (DR) Ernest Shonekan in his presentation at the 2005 All Nigeria Judges Conference on 'Judging the Judges : Judicial Ethics, Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers', listed about four issues that could inhibit adherence to the enforcement of the Code:-

## **LACK OF ENABLING ENVIRONMENT**

The opinion of the former National Interim President is that there are no institutional mechanisms in place to monitor and enforce compliance with the code. That the cultural attitude of Nigerians which make it difficult for people to come forward with information that could lead to the downfall of a wrongdoer constitutes a major impediment. I cannot agree more. We would all remember that during the tenure of Hon. Justice Aloma Mariam Mukhtar as CJN, when confronted with issues of corruption of judicial officers she always responded that such

complainants never made any report so as to set in motion the process. This should not be the position. There should be some internal mechanisms to originate this process. We cannot play the ostrich on this one. Even in the Civil Service when a civil servant commits any act of misconduct there are internal processes to deal with it. We cannot pretend to take the issue of sanctions against judicial officers seriously, without any internal mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance with the Code.

In Kano State, with regards to issues of misconduct, the JSC applies the Civil Service Rules in respect of discipline of magistrates and other non-judicial employees of the commission.

In the short period that I acted as Chief Judge of the State, I had tried to put in motion a process to put in place 'Judicial Service Rules', applicable to all categories of staff of the JSC. It is my hope that such an exercise is carried to fruition by not only Kano State but every other state that does not have such rules in place. I think this is important not only to wean us from the executive but to reinforce the judicial independence that we have been clamoring for.

### **LACK OF STRICT ADHERENCE TO ESTABLISHED CRITERIA FOR APPOINTMENT OF JUDICIAL OFFICERS**

This is another reason the former Interim President advanced for noncompliance with the Code. He reasoned that if the process

ensures that only people of proven character are appointed, cases of violation will be minimized. To fully appreciate the import of the concern of our elder statesman, which is also relevant for magistrates, it is worrisome that there are no guidelines for appointment of magistrates. In the past there were five pathways for new lawyers: Ministry of Justice, Magistracy, private bar, corporate practice and the academia.

It was easy to be appointed a magistrate without any experience at the bar. In recent times things have changed. The position varies from state to state. In some states they require some level of practice as a legal practitioner either in the private or public bar. Even in such states examples abound where lawyers without such requisite experience have been appointed magistrates due to 'godfatherism'. I propose that the JSC where they have not already done so should borrow a leaf from the NJC and have clear guidelines for appointment of judges.

In some states the JSC has introduced written and oral exams for persons who want to be appointed as magistrates. This is very commendable as it will help in ensuring that only people with the requisite intellectual and moral capacity get appointed to the magistracy bench. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized. The magistracy provides a large pool from which candidates to the higher bench are drawn. It will enhance judicial integrity and competence if we get it right at that level.

Another issue which will make for enhanced judicial performance is to make magistracy a career path. This has become critical in view of the increased number of magistrates, majority of who join

the lower bench only because they see it as easy path to the higher bench. If it becomes a career path then only those interested will seek the position. This will make room for commitment to excel. It will also remove the unhealthy lobbying that characterizes the process of appointment to the higher bench in the magistracy in many jurisdictions at the moment

Beyond these however it is important to observe the current and troubling dogmatic application of the Federal Character Commission Policy by the NJC in appointments to the higher bench. I should not be mistaken as being opposed to the policy. As a woman, coming from a position of discrimination I am in support of any form of quota that will ensure equitable balance between unequal groups. However the NJC has transformed the policy. The policy is concerned with the equitable and not equal representation that the NJC seems to have turned it into. This process compels the judiciary to play politics which it should not. Secondly it shuts out the best candidates on the altar of 'geographical spread' within a state as stipulated by the Federal Character Commission Policy. The process for appointment to the high court bench especially from the magistracy should be completely competitive. My view is that this policy should not be carried to such an extent as it even encourages disunity. Indigenes of a state should have allegiance to the state and not to the Local government they come from and they best should be selected based on clear cut criteria properly and justly administered.

## **PERVASIVENESS OF CORRUPTION AND INDISCIPLINE IN NIGERIA**

The opinion of Chief Shonekan on this is that where corruption and unethical practices are widespread in a society the reputation of all actors operating therein tend to become tainted whether they deserve it or not. That the bandwagon effect may take sway and sweep off the weak hearted along. This assertion may be true philosophically. It must however be pointed out that the saying that the judiciary is the last hope of the common man is not baseless. The expectation is that the judiciary represents a higher ideal to which other members of the society should aspire to. This places on them a higher duty to be above board. After all it is axiomatic that to whom much is given, much is expected.

## **POVERTY AND DETERIORATION OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

My major concern here is the deterioration of court buildings. As generally known the maintenance culture in this country is very poor. Some of our court facilities in some jurisdictions are dismal especially at the magistracy. For many of the state governments not only is the judiciary treated less than a government ministry or parastatal but it is not regarded as an institution for which the government feels the need to invest in its structural development.

Chief Shonekan empathized with judicial officers on the inadequacy of their emoluments. This is not an aspect I want to

take up in this presentation. This is not because I do not appreciate its importance. My reluctance is borne out of the fact that this is not the focus of my presentation. Secondly, I am not persuaded that a higher wage or remuneration is directly linked to high productivity or commitment. Don't get me wrong. It is important but not with the emphasis that is placed on it. Taking the wage packages of Judicial Officers across the country Lagos State stands out as the best remunerated. Has research proved that Lagos State magistrates are all committed with no ethical issues. The point being made is that in the Late 80s to early 90s the remuneration package for judges was pitiable, magistrates more so. By then people had to be cajoled to join the lower bench. Indeed in many jurisdictions it was populated mainly with women who were the only ones prepared to take the poor pay! But the magistrates in that era were more upright, God fearing and dedicated. This is especially true of those posted to the rural areas who were the number 2 citizens, next only to the village 'oba'! The moment conditions of service at the lower bench became more enhanced people started clamoring to join the lower bench. If the primary attraction is remuneration then I suggest that you find a new job!

The list of impediments is not exhaustive. I hope what is provided can provoke appropriate discussion on the subject.

The magistrates have an advantage which judges do not have. This is the right to practice as a barrister after retiring, resigning or even being removed from office. This right may sound like an attraction but it may not be if the removal is for misconduct or fraudulent activities. This is for the simple reason that no litigant would want to engage a counsel with such record to represent

him. So at best you may end up as a 'charge and bail' lawyer which is cold comfort.

### **COMMITMENT TO EXCEL:**

There can be code of conduct, judicial ethics et la but except the judicial officer has a commitment they will remain useless tools

A good judicial officer will not be intimidated by a senior counsel. One way to do this will be to be on top of your law, rules of practice and the facts of the case being heard. And to be above board in your personal conduct so much so that people know that they cannot approach you with anything unethical. You cannot afford to put love of money and material success as your primary goal as a judicial officer. If you do, you may have yourself to blame if you are swept away by the wind of change which will hope will sweep away the few bad eggs that give the judiciary a bad name.

Judicial Ethics and code of conduct are necessary tools to regulate minimum standards of behavior of judicial officers. In other words they provide a blue print for judicial conduct. This is necessary to maintain an independent strong and respected judiciary. But the judiciary is not island unto itself. It operates within the society. It therefore becomes challenging for judicial code of conduct to be effective in the face of eroding general societal code of ethics and standards. This was what obtained in Kenya. There the corruption went so deep into the judiciary that the judges and magistrates alike were not different from other

corrupt members of the society. We have a duty as judicial officers to prevent the general high level of corruption in the society from taking the judiciary hostage. We must not allow the few bad ones amongst us to destroy the image of the judiciary. A commitment of each of us to reinvent the honor and lost glory associated with judicial office will have a multiplier effect on the battered image of the judiciary. This is a commitment that has become urgent to save the judiciary. You cannot be a judge/magistrate and still "live like the Jones". The legacy of uprightness and moral probity on the bench can only be restored by this commitment to excel at the individual level. This commitment is reinforced in the judicial oath which we all ascribed to on our appointment as contained in the 7<sup>th</sup> schedule of the 1999 Constitution:

"..... I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Federal Republic of Nigeria..... I will discharge my duties, and perform my functions honestly, to the best of my ability and faithfully in accordance with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the law, that I will abide by the code of conduct contained in the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that I will not allow my personal interest to influence my official conduct or my official decisions; that I will preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the FEDERAL Republic of Nigeria. So help me God."

An adherence to this oath of office will go a long way in strengthening our resolve to excel as judicial officers. It will propel us to act according to the highest dictates of our

conscience. For we must as judicial officers be guided by the fundamental values of constitutional democracy and values of ordinary decency. Our integrity and that of the judiciary depend on it.

This is not easy but it is achievable. You will have your true independence and be free from intimidation in doing your work. Let us be guided by the instruction of Lord Mansfield G.J in the case of R V Wilkes (1770) 4 bus 2527 at 2562-2563 as follows:-

“I will not do that which my conscience tells me is wrong, upon this occasion to gain the huzzahs of thousands or the daily praise of the papers which come from the press, I will not avoid doing what I think is right though it should draw on me the whole artillery of libels, all that falsehood and malice on invent or the credulity of a deluded populace can swallow..... once and for all let it be understood, that no endeavors of this kind will influence any man who at present sit here (on the bench).”

To succeed in this commitment to excel as judicial officers, we must be guided always by the rule of law not by our personal greed. We must see our office as a mission and not a job. We must adhere to the ethics and code of conduct for judicial officers as ideals which will enable us make positive changes in our society. We must have the commitment to revive the good old traditions of the bench of strict adherence to judicial ethics, honour and uprightness which created great public confidence in

the judiciary. We should aim to reinvent the wheel as it were so that we can restore the Judiciary to its pride of place in our society. Above all I enjoin us to work with the fear of God, remembering always that as we sit at trial so shall we stand at trial.

I leave you with the warning from the Holy Quran Chapter 72 verse 15 quoted in the keynote address of my learned brother, the former Chief Judge of the Gambia, now a justice of the court of Appeal, Hon. Justice E.A Agim at the 2011 All Nigeria Judges Conference thus: "corrupt judges will not only go to hell will also be the firewood of hell fire".

I thank you for your patience.

## References:

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- 4) The Code of Conduct For Judicial Officers of The Federal Republic of Nigeria
- 5) The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria