spotlight on corruption

THE LONDON CORRUPTION TRIAL OF DIEZANI ALISON-MADUEKE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE



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Contents

Summary	2
Oily politics: 'Madam D 'of the Nigerian oil industry	4
Leaky profits: The missing $20 billion	4
Grand corruption under global scrutiny	5
A narrow prosecution: The UK opts for bribery charges	6
The backstory: A marathon investigation on a shoe-string budget	7
The politics of prosecution: The challenges of cross-border corruption investigations	9
A trial on life support: "Missing" evidence, diplomatic curveballs, and trial delays	12
Uncomfortable questions: The UK's approach to tackling corruption under scrutiny	15
A major setback for global efforts to end impunity for corruption	17
A test of UK resolve	18

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Summary

On 17 June 2026, a London jury cleared former Nigerian oil minister Diezani Alison-Madueke of bribery charges following a protracted 13-year investigation and a fraught five-month trial that has left a trail of tough questions for UK prosecutors and law enforcement. Her older brother Doye Agama and oil industry insider Olatimbo Ayinde were also acquitted of bribery charges.

Our analysis traces the origins of this investigation and the twists and turns of a dramatic jury trial that culminated in the acquittal of a woman who wielded unprecedented power over Nigeria's notoriously dysfunctional oil industry. We unpack what went wrong for the prosecution and why it matters for UK and international efforts to tackle corruption.

1. The case barely scratched the surface of grand corruption in Nigeria's oil industry. Alison-Madueke's acquittal on narrow charges leaves unanswered the bigger allegations from her time as oil minister, including $20 billion in missing oil revenues, multiple corporate corruption scandals, and civil recovery proceedings targeting assets linked to her in the US and Nigeria.

2. Opting for narrow bribery charges left big players and big profits out of the frame. Prosecutors focused only on Alison-Madueke's "life of luxury" in London, without offering any evidence that the oil tycoons who allegedly paid for her gifts were improperly awarded contracts. The result was a one-sided case about peripheral perks, dwarfed by the profits these businessmen made from lucrative Nigerian oil deals.

3. Serious delays in progressing the case to trial expose chronic resourcing and retention challenges at the National Crime Agency. Early momentum from the Metropolitan Police's Proceeds of Corruption (POC) team stalled once the case moved to the newly formed International Corruption Unit in the National Crime Agency (NCA), which struggled with outdated IT, skills shortages, and high staff turnover amid serious evidential and disclosure challenges.

4. Cross-border cooperation proved essential but fragile, and overseas evidence came under serious challenge at trial. NCA investigators depended heavily on Nigerian authorities for evidence, but responses were often slow and the defence claimed that vital evidence had "disappeared". A mid-trial intervention by Nigeria's Attorney General left prosecutors in an impossible bind – asking the jury to trust some evidence obtained from Nigerian authorities while simultaneously urging them to disregard other evidence

as unreliable.

5. Trying a foreign public official before a British jury has attracted criticism of how the UK tackles political corruption at home. The defence leaned on Nigeria's gift-giving culture to explain the perks bankrolled by oil executives, while the case has also prompted charges of hypocrisy against the UK applying a double standard in light of the gifts and hospitality lavished on British politicians.

6. A 13-year investigation and five-month trial exposed a criminal justice system under strain. The defence argued that the wait for trial was unfair, and even when it got underway it ran nearly twice as long as expected. The many delays and disruptions illustrate the practical challenges of lengthy jury trials in complex corruption cases while underscoring the need for investment in the wider criminal justice system, including specialist economic crime judges.

7. The acquittal is a major setback for global efforts to end impunity and will test the UK's resolve to tackle corruption. In Nigeria, the verdict has been received by civil society as a blow to anti-corruption efforts, with fears it will be used to deflect domestic accountability efforts as the acquittal is presented as evidence in domestic court proceedings. In the UK, the important lessons from this defeat should be taken forward with strengthened resolve and high-level political support for tackling corruption at home and abroad.

Oily politics: 'Madam D 'of the Nigerian oil industry

One of Africa's most prominent women in politics, Alison-Madueke enjoyed a meteoric rise to power in the oil industry. 'Madam D', as she became known, was the first woman to be appointed as an executive director of Shell in Nigeria and later became the first female president of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

But it was in politics that she assumed unprecedented control over Nigeria's lucrative but dysfunctional oil industry. Holding one of the most powerful ministerial positions in President Goodluck Jonathan's cabinet between 2010 and 2015, Alison-Madueke oversaw the Nigerian oil industry at a time when the oil market was booming – with oil production peaking at over $100 billion a year in 2011 and 2012.

Leaky profits: The missing $20 billion

Despite these favourable conditions, the Nigerian people were not to reap the rewards of their own natural resources. In 2013 the governor of Nigeria's central bank, Lamido Sanusi, reported to the President and the Senate that $20 billion in oil profits had "leaked" from the Nigerian National Petroleum Company ('NNPC'). While the NNPC brought in record-breaking receipts during this period, the revenue returned to Nigeria's treasury actually dropped.

While Sanusi was fired for raising the alarm about the missing $20 billion, the allegations prompted the Auditor General to commission PricewaterhouseCoopers to conduct an inquiry into the NNPC. The accounting firm's report – released by the government days after Goodluck Jonathan's election defeat in 2015 – verified many of Sanusi's claims and warned that the NNPC was operating with "a 'blank' cheque to spend money without limit or control' while being unwilling to open up its books.

Grand corruption under global scrutiny

Corruption and mismanagement have long plagued Nigeria's oil industry – with a particularly toxic mix between oil revenues and political finance – but the sheer scale of what went missing under Alison-Madueke's watch has drawn heightened scrutiny. Some of the biggest corporate bribery scandals overlap with her time in office, including the notorious OPL245 deal involving Shell and Eni with its ongoing fallout, and the "endemic" bribery by Glencore which saw the commodities giant pay more than $1 billion in global financial penalties.

But Alison-Madueke herself and the oil bosses who won big contracts during her tenure have also found themselves in the crosshairs of law enforcement action.

The US seizes a superyacht and luxury properties

In 2017, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) launched civil forfeiture proceedings, alleging that Alison-Madueke was involved in laundering the proceeds of corruption in, and through, the US. The DOJ's case was that Kolawole Aluko and Olajide Omokore, both prominent Nigerian business executives, had bribed Alison-Madueke. In return, the former minister was alleged to have exerted her influence over the awarding of oil contracts, known as Strategic Alliance Agreements (SAAs), to the benefit of Aluko and Omokore.

The DOJ made out this case on the balance of probabilities and seized assets bought with these oil profits, which ranged from a 65-metre superyacht named Galactica Star to numerous luxury properties in California and New York. By the time the civil forfeiture cases had wrapped up in 2023, a total of $53.1 million in cash and a promissory note worth $16 million had been seized.

It was recently announced that the US would return $53 million of the recovered funds to Nigeria. This marked the first time that alleged illicit wealth linked to Alison-Madueke outside of Nigeria was recovered and returned.

Nigeria pursue asset recovery proceedings

Nigeria's own anti-graft agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), has also made significant strides in seizing assets they say are linked to the ex-minister and represent the proceeds of corruption.

A whopping 56 houses linked to Alison-Madueke in Lagos and Port Harcourt were subject to a permanent forfeiture order by the Federal High Court in Lagos in 2017. Between 2017 and 2022, the Nigerian courts ordered the forfeiture of a $37.5 million mansion and two penthouses in Ikoyi and Banana Island, both neighbourhoods for Lagos' billionaires; $40 million worth of jewellery; two high-end properties in Abuja; and 2 luxury cars.

Following the recent verdict in the UK, Alison-Madueke commented on the Nigerian proceedings: "The assets that have been forfeited were not actually traced directly to me... I don't know what has happened to these matters at all. It's now that I'll have the freedom to find out what exactly has gone on there."

A narrow prosecution: The UK opts for bribery charges

Alison-Madueke has watched these US and Nigerian investigations unfold from afar, having been on bail in the UK ever since her arrest in London in 2015. Instead of trying to seize assets through civil recovery like the US and Nigeria, the UK opted for a criminal prosecution.

Bribery without contractual benefits?

In 2023, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) charged Alison-Madueke with five counts of accepting bribes and one count of conspiring to commit bribery during her tenure as Minister of Petroleum Resources. Her older brother Doye Agama – an archbishop at a Pentecostal church in Manchester – and oil industry insider Olatimbo Ayinde were also charged with offences under the UK Bribery Act 2010.

Unlike the US proceedings, the CPS did not allege that Alison-Madueke improperly awarded any contracts as a result of these bribes. The UK criminal case was framed far more narrowly – that her acceptance of the alleged bribes alone constituted improper performance of her role as a minister.

A "life of luxury" bankrolled by oil executives

In seeking to make out these bribery charges, the prosecution's case centred on Alison-Madueke's "life of luxury" in London said to be bankrolled by oil tycoons and industry insiders including Aluko and Omokore. These gifts and perks allegedly included her use of a chauffeur-driven car and private jet, lavish spending sprees including £2 million worth of luxury goods from Harrods, and stays at multiple properties in London's elite postcodes.

Besides Aluko and Omokore, a wider cast of characters were named on the indictment as participants to this alleged offending, including Benedict Peters, Igho Sanomi, Kevin Okyere and Olatimbo Ayinde. With the exception of Olatimbo Ayinde, who stood trial alongside Alison-Madueke, these individuals were notably absent from the proceedings despite the central roles they were alleged to play.

The backstory: A marathon investigation on a shoe-string budget

The Met quick off the mark

Despite only bringing charges in 2023, the UK was in some respects the quickest off the mark. An investigation was launched in 2013 – when Alison-Madueke was at the peak of her political career – and she was arrested in 2015 at her London home in St John's Wood. A year later, Southwark Crown Court made a restraint order against Alison-Madueke and a number of businessmen, freezing a number of UK properties to ensure they could not be sold off while the NCA's investigation progressed.

While the NCA ultimately progressed the case to trial, much of this early work was done by the Metropolitan Police's Proceeds of Crime (POC) team, who kicked off the investigation in 2013. This specialist team – supported by UK overseas aid funding – had built up a successful track record for investigating cross-border corruption cases and had shown a willingness to pursue powerful Nigerian politicians who laundered ill-gotten gains into the UK.

A track record of targeting powerful Nigerian governors

The political elites targeted by the Met's POC team include a trio of former Nigerian governors accused of laundering eye-watering sums of money into the UK. Their first case targeted Joshua Deriya, the former governor of Plateau State who was ultimately convicted (but later pardoned) in Nigeria after skipping bail in the UK. The investigation did however secure the conviction of an accomplice and the return of some of Deriya's stolen loot. Similarly, their money laundering investigation into Diepreye Alamieyeseigha resulted in the return of almost £1 million to Nigeria, although the former governor of Bayelsa state escaped prosecution after he jumped bail by allegedly dressing up as a woman when leaving the UK.

The Met POC team's most high-profile success was the conviction in 2012 of James Ibori, the former governor of the oil-rich Delta State who pleaded guilty to money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the Nigerian state and its people – although the £101 million subject to a confiscation order has yet to be returned.

The NCA changes tack

In 2015, the Met's Proceeds of Crime team was subsumed into the NCA, with their ongoing casework – including the investigation into Diezani Alison-Madueke – being carried forward by the new aid-funded International Corruption Unit (ICU).

Looking in from the outside of the investigation, it is difficult to know what factors might have shaped case strategy or what obstacles might have stalled progress, but there are a couple of striking features that shed light on how the investigation began and where the case ended up at trial 13 years later.

The first is a shift in focus from money laundering to bribery. At the time of Alison-Madueke's arrest in 2015, the NCA commented that its "recently formed International Corruption Unit has arrested five people across London as part of an investigation into suspected bribery and money laundering offences". Quite clearly, the ICU subsequently decided to drop the money laundering dimension of its investigation – despite this being a strategy that had yielded some success against Joshua Dariye, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha and James Ibori – and opted to focus solely on suspected bribery offences.

The second feature – partly flowing from the first – is a reduction in the scope of the alleged offending and the benefits flowing from it. Even in formulating its case on bribery, the narrow framing of the case ultimately put forward meant that the prosecution did not delve into the details of contracts that were awarded under Alison-Madueke's tenure to businessmen named on the indictment.

This meant that the financial benefits that flowed from these lucrative deals were out of the frame – and out of reach – without money laundering charges. Money laundering charges predicated on bribery would have brought these businessmen into scope by examining the profits made on the contracts awarded to them, while framing the array of spending in the UK as a means of transferring and concealing alleged illicit wealth.

Chronic resourcing and retention challenges

These strategic choices were no doubt constrained by the evidence the NCA was able to secure and later rely on at trial, and it emerged from pre-trial hearings that the NCA faced considerable disclosure challenges – including the need to respond to over 1000 separate disclosure requests from the defence. These difficulties likely contributed to the delay in progressing the case to charge, and any setbacks would not have been helped by chronic resourcing challenges and high staff churn at the NCA.

While the ICU has managed to punch above its weight on a shoe-string budget, the impact of the NCA's resourcing challenges is particularly acute in long-running bribery investigations. Progressing complex cases to trial is an uphill battle when operating with outdated IT systems, specialist skills are in short supply, and there is little continuity in investigating officers.

The politics of prosecution: The challenges of cross-border corruption investigations

In addition to these internal constraints, the NCA and CPS also faced considerable external pressures bringing a prosecution that implicated powerful political elites and billionaire businessmen like Benedict Peters and Igho Sanomi who rank among Africa's most influential energy tycoons.

UK investigators and prosecutors in the firing line

Shortly after charges were brought against Alison-Madueke in August 2023, complaints were lodged against the NCA and CPS – with one specialist prosecutor coming under more targeted attack – for showing contempt of decisions by the Nigerian courts which were said to have cleared Benedict Peters of wrongdoing. A local campaign group petitioning the Nigerian parliament accused the British authorities of "carrying out actions to defame, distract and undermine Benedict Peters" by "dragging his name" into UK court proceedings on issues that had been settled by the Nigerian courts.

While UK law enforcement persisted with the prosecution, they released £50 million worth of London property belonging to Peters following these complaints. The lifting of this restraint order – which had been obtained a decade ago on the urging of Nigerian authorities – was hailed by some in the Nigerian press as a "triumph over legal tyranny",

with Nigeria's EFCC and its "British collaborators" being accused of a political vendetta against Peters.

In late 2025, lawyers instructed by Peters approached the UK court to keep his name out of the looming criminal trial, but this application – which Spotlight on Corruption and media partners opposed – was withdrawn on the day it was due to be decided by the judge.

To extradite or not to extradite

These legal battles around Peters, who is just one of the high-profile businessmen named on the UK indictment, provide an insight into the political minefield of prosecuting a foreign official for corruption. While the EFCC had supported – and at times pushed for – UK enforcement action, this cross-border cooperation has not been plain sailing.

Only a couple of months after the CPS brought charges against Alison-Madueke in 2023, the EFCC announced it had obtained a warrant for her arrest and would begin extradition proceedings. This did not materialise, however, and one of the key unanswered questions that Alison-Madueke's defence barrister put to the jury during her trial was why the Nigerian government did not pursue her prosecution.

In defence of a prosecution

Ahead of the London trial, the defence brought multiple legal challenges seeking to put a stop to the prosecution as an abuse of the court's process.

Inviting the judge to toss out the case, Alison-Madueke's lawyers pointed to the long delay in bringing the case to trial, the unavailability of a substantial body of evidence relevant to the defence, and the removal from office of allegedly corrupt EFCC officials involved in the Nigerian investigation. Arguing along similar lines, Ayinde's lawyer claimed that the NCA had failed to follow reasonable lines of inquiry said to be core to her defence – in particular, her alleged role as an informant for Nigeria's security services.

In defending the integrity of its case, the prosecution drew attention to the complexities and challenges of conducting a cross-border corruption investigation. The bulk of evidence was gathered in Nigeria, with NCA investigators making at least seven trips to the country and being heavily reliant on the EFCC for cooperation and assistance. The investigation also

had multiple other international touchpoints, including the Seychelles, British Virgin Islands, Switzerland, Australia and Ghana.

The chronology of the investigation exposed just how slow the official channels for information-sharing are. The UK sent multiple international letters of request stretching back to 2015, with responses only received months and sometimes even years later. Significantly, these sluggish responses were not all on the Nigerian side – the Seychelles took over a year to respond to one request, while Switzerland took almost two years in another instance.

The prosecution also explained that UK investigators had been cautious in their dealings with the EFCC after becoming aware that Ibrahim Magu, the acting chairman of the EFCC between 2015 and 2020, appeared to have "tipped off" Ayinde before her arrest by the NCA in 2017. While making efforts to corroborate evidence obtained from the EFCC, the prosecution emphasised that the EFCC was the only means by which international letters of request could be processed in Nigeria.

The public interest in prosecuting alleged political corruption

The judge ultimately rejected the abuse of process challenges, ruling that these delays and evidential constraints were not the result of prosecutorial misconduct or bad faith on the part of NCA investigators but rather inherent in complex investigations requiring extensive overseas inquiries. While UK prosecutors must take reasonable steps to obtain evidence from overseas, they cannot compel authorities in a foreign country to disclose relevant material.

Recognising the "additional public interest" at play in this case, the judge also reasoned that the "prosecution of serious allegations of corruption at the highest level of a foreign government should not be prevented from going ahead by allegations of corruption levelled at Nigerian investigators, particularly in circumstances where there is evidence to suggest that the misconduct may have included attempts to assist a defendant to evade justice".

A trial on life support: "Missing" evidence, diplomatic curveballs, and trial delays

The defendants' early attempts to have the case thrown out foreshadowed the arguments fleshed out during the trial, which eventually got underway in January 2026. While the prosecution detailed a long list of extravagant expenses and luxury perks alleged to constitute bribes, the defence sought to persuade the jury that the investigation had missed crucial evidence which would exonerate them.

London's role as a playground for corrupt elites

Notably, the prosecution kicked off the trial by explaining to the jury why a case about the Nigerian oil industry was being heard in the UK. The lead prosecutor said, "We live in a global society. Bribery and corruption undermine the proper function of the global market. And there is, isn't there, an important public interest in ensuring the conduct in our country does not further corruption in another country".

Her comments foreshadowed the evidence heard later in the trial of spectacular shopping sprees in Mayfair, Marylebone, and Knightsbridge, as well as property purchases in some of London's swankiest postcodes. But this framing also alludes to London's widely documented role as a hub for dirty money via its plethora of professional services firms who can unwittingly or knowingly enable illicit finance flows.

In making these comments, she pre-empted a question which would become a familiar refrain from defence counsel over the next few months: Why was this case being tried in the UK before a British jury? This was mirrored at the close of the trial, with Alison-Madueke's counsel asserting that "This should have been a Nigerian case" because his client's conduct and the cultural context of the case would have been better understood in Nigeria. He went on to tell the jury that "Things which may seem uncomfortable or extravagant to us sitting here may feel very different to 12 people sitting in Nigeria".

Extravagant expenses and luxury perks – ministerial business as usual?

In pitching its case to the jury, the prosecution painted Alison-Madueke as enjoying a "life of luxury" in London which was paid for by industry insiders who knew her influence over Nigeria's oil industry. These oil executives rolled out the red carpet for the minister, giving

her the use of a chauffeur-driven car and private jet, and allowing her to stay in their multi-million-pound mansions. The evidence also detailed her lavish spending sprees on everything from Gucci handbags to Venetian vases, with Aluko forking out more than £2 million on luxury goods at Harrod's alone.

In a statement read out to the jury, former President Goodluck Jonathan rejected the prosecution's framing of these arrangements. He explained that ministers travelling abroad would often rely on third parties to cover expenses which would be "recorded and reimbursed where applicable", and stated that he had signed off on his oil minister's use of private jets for some of her international trips.

"Madam Due Process" takes the stand

But the most comprehensive counter to the prosecution's case came from Alison-Madueke herself, who spent almost 11 days in the witness box. Her testimony took the jury back to her childhood and early professional career, presenting herself as a trailblazer who defied the odds in a male-dominated oil industry by becoming the first woman to be put "at the helm of the nation's most powerful sector".

Turning the prosecution's case on its head, she cast herself as an anti-corruption campaigner who tried to stamp out the "corrupt practices" that had "plagued" Nigeria's oil industry "since colonial times". Far from abusing her position or accepting improper financial benefits, the former minister told the jury she was called the "Iron Lady" and "Madame Due Process" because she was such a "stickler" for following the rules.

Missing evidence in a political witch hunt

Turning to the specific allegations, Alison-Madueke insisted that the payments made by the oil executives were common arrangements to accommodate the fact that government ministers in Nigeria are not allowed to have foreign bank accounts. She explained to the jury that Nigerians expect ministers to offer "complete access" to business executives within their remit, which includes a culture of gift-giving.

She also maintained that the expenses were duly recorded and repaid, but this vital evidence had "disappeared" since she left office. Officials from the NNPC confirmed to the court that searches relating to the individuals and companies accused of bribing the former oil minister turned up no results in their systems.

While the current legal director of the NNPC alleged that Alison-Madueke and her aides had removed these official records from the ministry when she left office, the former oil minister maintained she has been scapegoated following a change in political power.

Nigerian authorities intervene to vouch for oil executive

The political temperature of the trial increased significantly with a mid-trial intervention by the Nigerian authorities backing up Ayinde's defence that she was a whistleblower working with the country's security services. While the prosecution alleged that Ayinde paid a $5 million bribe to Alison-Madueke successor, a letter from Nigeria's Attorney General claimed that the third defendant had in fact been asked to "play along" with the bribery after alerting the authorities when she was solicited for the bribe.

This letter – which landed in the week of President Tinubu's state visit to the UK – nearly derailed the trial, with the jury being sent home for three weeks while the court heard legal argument on the ramifications of this "unanticipated development". While the court once again rejected Ayinde's renewed bid to have the case against her thrown out, the judge did allow the jury to hear this evidence.

This intervention may not only have delayed the trial but likely also contributed to the ultimate downfall of the prosecution's case. This is because it caused the prosecution's case to fall between two stools: on the one hand, the prosecution invited the jury to trust the credibility of evidence obtained from the EFCC about Alison-Madueke, while on the other hand it urged the jury to disregard evidence from the Nigerian authorities about Ayinde. In his closing speech to the jury, Alison-Madueke's counsel characterised this as an "extraordinary contradiction".

Uncomfortable questions: The UK's approach to tackling corruption under scrutiny

The UK criminal justice system on trial

By any measure, this case was a marathon and faced massive setbacks. The UK's investigation took 10 years to reach the point of charge, and 13 years to progress to trial. The defence argued that this long delay was unfair, characterising it as a sign of Britain's "broken criminal justice system".

The trial itself proved equally difficult to keep on track. Scheduled to last up to a maximum of 12 weeks, it ended up taking almost twice as long. Jury members showed immense commitment in sacrificing almost six months of their lives for this public service. This included deliberating for over 46 hours across 13 days set aside to attempt to reach a verdict – although a couple of these days were unexpectedly called off due to sickness.
There were numerous disruptions which offer a vivid illustration of the practical and unavoidable challenges of lengthy jury trials in complex economic crime cases: besides sick days, there were days jurors were delayed due to train strikes across London, and previously booked commitments which necessitated a pause from deliberations for two weeks.

This occurred against the backdrop of a heated national debate on the merits of jury reform as the government's proposed shake-up of the criminal courts makes its way through parliament as part of the Courts and Tribunals Bill. These reforms would introduce judge-only trials for the most complex economic crime and corruption cases – such as this one – which are often at the back of the courtroom queue. As we have argued, however, these reforms will only be successful with wider investment in the criminal justice system as well as the creation of a specialist economic crime ticket for judges.

Charges of UK hypocrisy and double standards

The significance of the Nigerian context of the case featured heavily as defence arguments sought to pick up on both continuities and contrasts with the UK's culture and politics, particularly the conduct and expectations of cabinet ministers.

On the one hand, the defence pounced on the prosecution's characterisation of Alison-Madueke's acceptance of gifts and hospitality as "corruption", suggesting the UK is applying

a double standard about what constitutes corruption. During a pre-trial attempt to have her case thrown out, Alison-Madueke's counsel argued that her use of a property owned by Aluko and Omokore was analogous to British Ministers' use of estates which do not belong to them, proffering Chequers as an example. Keir Starmer's use of a property owned by businessman Rod Lloyd and Boris Johnson's use of a property owned by businessman David Ross were offered as further examples in aid of the argument that accepting the use of such properties does not – without more – constitute improper behaviour.

This charge of hypocrisy has also been echoed outside the courtroom, with one Nigerian media outlet characterising the UK's restraint of London properties used by Alison-Madueke as "a legal logic that, applied consistently, would implicate half of Westminster."

Culture, not corruption?

On the other hand, the defence also sought to distinguish British culture and practices as being poles apart from the context in which Nigerian politicians operate – with its culture of gift giving, the respect and reverence typically shown to leaders, the practice of being one's brother's keeper, and the expectations that the business community and wider public have of government ministers.

In her evidence, Alison-Madueke told the jury that, in contrast to Britain, Nigerian cabinet ministers are expected to offer complete access to business leaders in the sector they oversee, and explained that her failure to do so on one occasion led to her being branded as "arrogant, rigid, and un-Nigerian".

Despite the frequent reference to differing Nigerian customs and practices, the jury were directed by the judge that they should not take these into account when deciding whether Alison-Madueke's acceptance of any alleged advantages was a breach of her position of trust, good faith and impartiality expected as a minister. The test to be applied was what a reasonable person in the UK would expect from a minister.

Ultimately, the trial became an arena where law and politics spectacularly clashed. Politics, of both the small "p" and big "P" kind, were prevalent throughout – from the shifting dynamics of international cooperation with Nigerian authorities over the course of a decade, the dilemma of how to handle the mid-trial intervention by Nigeria's Attorney-General, the credibility of claims made by the Nigerian security services, and the recurring references to a domestic political backdrop marred by ethics and integrity scandals involving British politicians.

A major setback for global efforts to end impunity for corruption

Although the verdict came in an unassuming fashion, on a stuffy Wednesday afternoon as the parties re-assembled in court room 2 of Southwark Crown Court, it quickly made global waves. There has been widely reported shock and frustration in Nigeria over the outcome, with a former presidential aide among those calling for Alison-Madueke to face domestic accountability.

Local civil society organisations have expressed dismay at the UK verdict. Transparency International's Nigerian chapter, the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), suggested the "verdict underscores the challenges associated with securing criminal convictions against politically exposed persons based largely on circumstantial lifestyle evidence", and highlights "longstanding weaknesses in Nigeria's anti-corruption architecture".

The African Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ) similarly described the outcome as a "setback for global anti-corruption efforts". The NGO warned that the verdict is not only a "blow to the United Kingdom's reputation and leadership in the global fight against corruption and illicit financial flows", but may also "send the wrong signal" to those tasked with fighting corruption at home in Nigeria.

There is particular concern that the UK acquittal – on very narrow charges – will be pointed to in answer to the questions which continue to hang over Alison-Madueke's legacy as oil minister in Nigeria, setting back local efforts for accountability. These fears will be amplified as the Federal High Court in Abuja has reportedly granted Alison-Madueke permission to submit evidence of her acquittal in an attempt to recover her forfeited assets in Nigeria. Civil society groups have urged Nigerian authorities to pursue outstanding domestic cases against Alison-Madueke, observing that "the acquittal did not erase concerns about governance failures and systemic weaknesses exposed during the period under review".

A test of UK resolve

The failures of this landmark bribery prosecution will likely be dissected for years to come. Some missteps have already been diagnosed by defence lawyers as symptomatic of the NCA's relative lack of experience when it took on this complex corruption investigation, combined with resourcing issues within the agency.

Clearly there are important lessons to be learned from both the protracted investigation and the volatile trial, but this high-profile defeat must not be taken as grounds for the NCA to roll back on its commitment to tackle corruption enabled by the UK – including cases involving foreign public officials. On the contrary, this defeat should focus minds in government and strengthen the resolve of our law enforcement agencies to make the changes needed to future-proof complex corruption cases – from developing a more resilient case strategy, providing sustained resourcing and specialist skill to support case progression, and strengthening cooperation with international counterparts in Nigeria and beyond.



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