

Ethical Considerations in the Nigerian Public Service and Governance

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Abstract: The utility of ethics in governance and public service provides the framework for a common understanding between leaderships and citizens. While ethics dwells within the realm of morality, beneficence and good will, the empirical applications of its tenets tends to fostering accountability, integrity, and transparency in leaderships. The ethical conundrums encountered in developing nations like Nigeria are not only confounded by the individual-centric nature of morality and ethical practices, but also on the ethno-centric divisions existing within the polity. Many ill vices such as corruption and total disregard to the rule of law have been engendered within the Nigerian state due to the ethno-centric nature of the country, the chaos of leadership, and the sidelining of standard ethical practices. The failure of the Nigerian state at uniting her people has not been without a cost, however, in order to making progress and advancing among the committee of nations, citizens of Nigeria need to jettison their ethno-centric sentiments and imbibe a more nationalistic attitude. The educational system should be more transformative and reformative in its curriculum and approaches, the creation of anti-graft agencies should be more inclusive and consensus driven; and the regulatory and compliance mechanisms at following strictly the tasks and duties of the anti-graft agencies should be fully developed and imbibed. In addition, the punishment for corrupt practices should be more stringent and less accommodating. This review takes a critical look at the prime role ethics plays in the governance of a nation, and the chaos that sets in when leaderships jettison ethics and morality in their affairs. With regards to the Nigerian state, important recommendations are also given to help foster a more ethically and morally guided leadership and practices, in a bid to fostering a better society.

Key Words: Nigeria, Ethics, Morality, Corruption, Ethno-centric, Virtue, Nationalists

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics are sets of ideals or principles that forms the basis for right actions (Lawton, et al. 2012). Governments, organizations and individuals are not only guided, but are expected to act in concurrence with ethical ideals and principles. The challenges associated with the handling and management of ethical issues in both the public and private sectors are in a constant state of flux with the varied social, organizational, and ethnic factors influencing individual preferences. High expectations are placed on leaders, especially those occupying public offices. It is therefore expected that public office holders would abide by the principles of public service at upholding and exhibiting integrity, selflessness, accountability, openness, honesty, objectivity, respect for persons, leadership, exercise legitimate

authority and conduct their due duty to upholding the law (Lawton, et al. 2012). Ethics dwells within the realm of morality that seeks common good. These common good is being guided by the basic principles of beneficence, least harm, respect for autonomy, and justice (Chonko, 2012). Because the moral philosophies of individuals remains the singular factor influencing how moral issues are viewed, and the ultimate decider of ethical choices (Kung & Huang, 2013), it therefore implies that the challenges of ethical issues is individual-centric; however, these individual choices can sometimes have cataclysmic effects on not just the individual, but also on systems, societies, governments, organizations, and institutions.

The role of ethics in guiding individuals, organizations, institutions, and governments in their rules of engagements, and in engendering popular goodwill within a polity is within the limit of reason because it provides the framework for accountability between the Public and Administration. Adhering to a strong Ethical conduct provides an administration with the guidelines for integrity in their activities while also creating an atmosphere of trust as the public are assured of getting what rightfully belongs to them in a fair manner (UTA, 2020). Ethics provides a standard of professionalism that Administrators and co-workers can expect from each other. In addition, citizens can also expect this same standard of professionalism from their leaders. A strong code of Ethics is an arbiter to guiding leaders in the execution of their tasks and responsibilities. Following standard Ethical codes of conduct also ensures the timely exchange of information between leaderships and their citizens. Thus, citizens are not left in the dark regarding matters of Public importance (UTA, 2020).

The inability of governments and public office holders in most nations like Nigeria at following Ethical rules is what has led to the total lack of trust in both the Political and the Public Management arenas (Ogbeidi, 2012; Ogundiya, 2010). In Nigeria, there are divers rules, regulations and code of conducts guiding the management and operations of different public agencies. In fact, there is a Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB) specially established towards ensuring the compliance of government agencies, organizations, and bureaucrats to lay down rules and principles guiding Government establishments and practices (Marshall & Murtala, 2015). In a bid to fighting the high level of corruption and indiscipline in Nigeria, various regimes have made efforts at establishing different anti-graft agencies to

help fight the ill vices in the public sector of the country. Such agencies includes the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Service Compatible with All Nigerian Commission (SERVICOM) (Amaefule & Umeaka, 2016). Despite these laudable efforts of governments, it has now come to the fore that establishing policies and agencies with good intentions without the involvement of critical stakeholders could only tend to the failure of intent, a waste of resources, and a waste of productive time and energy. The stark failure of these established agencies at sanitizing the Nigerian system is a reflection of a giddy state reeling with the chaos of leadership. This article takes a cursory look at the ethical considerations surrounding Public Governance in Nigeria.

II. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Ethics and Virtue in the Nigerian State

The Nigerian state is a structural giant with many complexities. The juxtaposition of over 300 different ethnic groups into a single element called Nigeria has been viewed by many as aberrant and anomalous (Osifo, 2009). Thus, implementing ethical principles in an ethnically divided society can become a dilemma and a burden to both leadership and followers. The inadvertent consequence of this societal dichotomy is the lack of trust in government and in the public service (Iroghama, 2012). Many citizens believe that their voice would not be heard unless a representative from their ethnic group is there to speak for them in government. When citizens do not feel represented at the level of decision-making, their commitment to keeping to the ethos of ethical principles is waned. Ethics and moral rectitude forms the basis for good governance in any civil society, and the central role of ethics at aligning the common good of societies in a beneficial manner is what has tend to its application in all works of life. The myriads of ethical challenges arising in the Nigerian society cuts across all strata of the polity.

In any civil society, the ethics of Right guarantees the fundamental rights of all citizens. It is generally assumed in an egalitarian society that when a citizen abides by the rules and regulations of the land, such a citizen should enjoy the freedom of a law-abiding citizen without impediments. The Nigerian state has however failed many of its law-abiding citizens in a degenerate manner that leaves no room for rationality or objectivity (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012). When citizens breaks or disobeys the law, there should be a level of presumption of innocence and a benefit of the doubt until proven guilty. However, when the fundamental rights of the human person are denied because of the failure of leadership and sheer impunity without recourse to standard ethical rules, there would be left only a shadow of the element of trust. The wanton destruction of lives, sources of livelihood, and properties of the citizens of Nigeria by the Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria is a basic denial of the Fundamental rights to life, dignity, and personal liberty (Uzodike &

Mainangwa, 2012). The rights to the freedom of religion especially by the Christian Minority in Northern Nigeria has been grossly denied through the rabid destruction of places of worship and sources of livelihood (Ojo, 2007).

The inept leadership and failed system of governance in Nigeria is chronically averse to criticism. Thus, whatever form of criticism meted to the government is unacceptable. Hence, the fundamental freedom of expression of citizens is largely gagged and restrained with force and violence by the government (Vareba, et al. 2017). Opposition parties are nay-sayers and looser; and their opinions are skewed and aimed at derailing the government in power. The rights of Nigerians to the freedom of association and assembly is only limited to that allowed and approved by the apparatus of government and any such gatherings without government approval are deemed illegal and criminalized (Vareba, et al. 2017).

Virtue is a moral strain that establishes a familiar cord through established character. Virtue is an integral part of responsible leadership (Abimbola & Abimbola, 2011), and ethical leadership is the galvanizing force that can pull together the different socio-cultural and ethnic groups within the Nigerian state. Successive governments in Nigeria have so far failed in ethical leadership as virtue and moral rectitude stands binary to the alliance of greed and self-gain (Niworu, 2010). The national character of the Nigerian state is self-seeking and self-gratifying with each ethnic groups only interested in what they can get and benefit from the National polity. The skewed development of the Nigerian state along tribal lines is a testament to the crude orientation of a people who sees not a nation but a land mass with circumscribed islets of unfamiliar people. Because of this deviant orientation of the citizens, political leaderships and representatives, elected and appointed leaders, and bureaucratic public office holders only seek what is best for themselves and their ethnic group first before considering others. Thus, when people gets into public offices, their first priority is to benefit themselves first and then their ethnic group (Bello, 2012). The failure of a public office holder to benefiting his/her ethnic group before others is seeing as a betrayal and a failure at capitalizing on the opportunity given. As paradoxical as it may seem, imbibing the spirit of true nationalism or federalism will be a deviation from the dichotomous character of the Nigerian state.

The nationalist spirit of the founding fathers of the Nigerian state is in tandem with the tenets of utilitarianism. What produces the greatest good for the greatest number of the citizens was the fundamental drive behind the agitation for independence from colonial rule. The Nigerian founding fathers probably had the dream of a nation united in purpose and common goal. History has however shown that there was once a dream that today seem more like a shadow (Achebe, 1984). In a divided society, there is hardly a consensus of purpose or popular will on issues of state. Different ethnic groups have different opinions on same issue, and what one ethnic group think best is the worst that could ever happen to

another ethnic group. Thus, leaderships are constantly in a state of dilemma, leading to many unsavory radical political and socio-economic decisions. Even at rare instances when majority of the citizens agree on certain public issues, the political leaderships have formed the habit of contravening popular opinions and going against the popular will. An instance is the sudden increase in the price of petroleum products by the Nigerian government during the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic (Adekoya, et al. 2020). Because governments and its leadership know that there is hardly a common will among the Nigerian people, it has also devised a way of implementing its self-seeking agenda even during tough economic times. This lack of a common voice among the citizens has engendered too many ill vices in governance. Rent-seekers thrive without restraints, and political allies lobby to get juicy contracts of government (Ebbe, 1999). Political governance in the Nigerian state and the popular will of the citizens are not in par. Thus, government and its organs of administration are seen by the citizens as being distant and out of touch. The citizens talk and infer about government like an alien entity under whose oppressions they could hardly wait to be freed. The legality of a democratic society guarantees the common good of the citizens with a true utilitarian spirit, this has however not been the case within the Nigerian state.

The Nigerian Ethical Conundrum

The governance, leadership, and public management structures within the Nigerian state are littered with more rules, obligations, code of ethics and conducts than could be obliged or adhered. Many of these rules and obligations are borrowed or lifted verbatim from foreign states without proper assimilation. The rigid deontological adherence to established rules and obligations however could have been laudable were it meant for the common good of the citizens. For instance, the several challenges associated with the Nigerian law enforcement agents and the judiciary hinges on deontological profiteering from citizens who have broken the law. Several cases of extortion and the denial of legal rights abound from arrested or incarcerated citizens (Oko, 2005; Salman & Ayankogbe, 2011)). Brazen law enforcement agents are sometimes seen harassing citizens who has committed no offence simply for extorting money from such citizens (Onweme, 1982). The judiciary are also fond of making merchandise off their legal cases in order to derailing the cause of judgement (Ayodeji & Odukoya, 2014). Deontological profiteering also exists at other agencies of government where established rules and regulations are been used to diverting public funds into private coffers. Most recent evidence of this includes the current scandal surrounding the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) (RN, 2020; Adedayo, 2020). Different agencies of government in Nigeria now sees it as a norm to exploiting specific rules, guidelines, and obligations for personal profiteering. Loopholes and weaknesses in this rules are been explored for self-gain to the

detriment of the citizens. The audacity of these state elements is further emboldened by the weak and corrupt judicial system in the country (Ayodeji & Odukoya, 2014). This systemic pervasion and erosion of the common resources has created a corrupt generation of leaders and public office holders without shame or care.

Corruption in Nigeria

There are myriads of challenges within the Nigerian state, but the challenge of corruption has made light the many other teething issues. Nigeria is a country richly blessed with abundant mineral resources. Yet, corruption has remained the limiting force to the country's growth and progress. The canker of corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society, so much so that the socio-economic strata and the political spheres of the polity have been marred with instability and sheer distrust among the citizenry; with a growing global disrepute. The corruption index of Nigeria is one of the highest in the world (TI, 2020). The lack of social-economic development and the lack of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country is a testament to the increasing downward spiral the country is towing (Udoh & Egwaikhide, 2008).

Corruption exists in all sector of the Nigerian polity. The political gangsters that brings in many illegitimate politicians and their cronies is a precedence to the many corrupting influence seeing in the Nigerian society (Ogundiya, 2009). Unqualified politicians use money to buy their way into power against popular will. Vocal and legitimate politicians are intimidated and rigged out of office in order to pave way for loyalists and conformists. In Nigeria, political and public office holders loot public funds and monies meant for public projects with sheer impunity (RN 202; Adedayo, 2020). Many theories have been propounded as to explaining the reason for the widespread corruption in Nigeria, however, the key challenge and the key motivating factor for continued corrupt practices in Nigeria is the issue of "Low-cost High-benefit" (Ogundiya, 2009; Ogundiya, 2010). When public office holders know that the punishment to be meted for their corrupt practices is inconsequential to the amount of monies and wealth they are going to amass, they are spur and encouraged to stealing from public coffers. The wave of indiscipline and corruption in the Nigerian political and public management arena, coupled with the poor performance and ineptitude on the part of public office holders has eroded the faith of the citizens in the public governance (Omisore & Adeleke, 2015). The chains of abandoned and uncompleted projects, the poor infrastructural developments, the poor and bad roads, the epileptic power supplies, the lack of portable water, the increasing poverty level and lack of proper accommodation for the citizens despite the huge wealth in the country has been termed by many as a curse of blessings. The audacity and boldness with which public office holders in Nigeria now loot and embezzled public funds without shame or respect to the law, is now seen by many citizens as a movie series which does not have an ending part. Thus, different

criminal actors without consequences have now turned the Nigerian state into a scandalous movie theater.

The Floating Ethics and the Chaos of Leadership

Within the Nigerian state, morality, moral rectitude, and ethical considerations in public management and leaderships are merely floating ideals. Thus, the ethics and the rules do exist in theory, but in practice, they have no effects whatsoever. All bureaucrats are fully aware of the rules of right and wrong, and the code of ethics guiding their respective organizations; however, they are more accustomed to functioning without the rules and restraints guiding public offices. Corrupt practices have been standardized and dogmatically enshrined in unwritten constitutions and guides. New employees are now indoctrinated with rules and instructions that are not in the book. Institutions sometimes refer to these illegal rules as standard practices (Osakede, et al. 2015; Ogbeidi, 2012). Thus, the juxtaposition of right and wrong without a demarcating line has created an unsavory resonance.

When leaderships get into power without the peoples mandate especially in a dichotomous society, there is little such leaders can do to salvaging the polity from instability and unrest. When leaders have no clear ideas or vision as to the right destination to which a people should be led, there is bound to be chaos and endless agitations. Nigeria is confronted with many challenges, but the bane of getting the right leaders to steering the country in the right direction, the bane of getting true nationalists that can still see the dreams of the nation's founding fathers, is one of the confounders militating against the progress of the country. Successive bad leaderships in Nigeria has been a burden and continued to being a burden (Ochulor, 2011; Eniayejuni & Evcan, 2015).

III. CONCLUSION

The Nigerian state today seem like a field of play without a goalpost. The right application of the Ethical theories guided by morality and the principle of beneficence seem like the best approach to safely guiding the country out of the doldrums of these times. However, the right application of these theories can only be guaranteed if the citizens fully understood the tenets of a nation and what makes a people united. The Nigerian ethno-centric sentiments need be jettisoned and a true nationalist attitude must be imbibed (Edewor, et al. 2014). The Nigerian educational system needs to incorporate transformative and reformatory education into school curriculum. If the old curriculum is not effective, then they need be reviewed to meeting today's requirements. It is also not enough to establishing anti-graft agencies without the agreement of the critical stakeholders. In addition, merely establishing anti-graft agencies does not guarantee success at enshrining good ethical practices nor at fighting corruption if the penalty for indiscipline and corrupt offences is lenient and accommodating. Regulatory frameworks and compliance mechanisms towards ensuring universal adherence to

established rules and regulations also need be incorporated (Cowell, 2011) within the Nigerian polity.

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